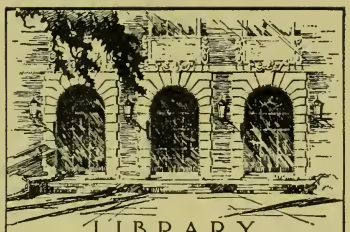

THE STAR-GAZERS

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BY

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'ELIS' CHILDREN,' 'A DOUBLE KNOT,' 'THE NEW MISTRESS,' ETC., ETC.

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CONTENTS

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CHAPTER I.

LODESTARS.

BEN HAYLE, keeper, stepped out of his rose-covered cottage in Thoreby Wood; big, black-whiskered, dark-eyed and handsome, with the sun-tanned look of a sturdy Englishman, his brown velveteen coat and vest and tawny leggings setting off his stalwart form.

As he cleared the porch, he half-turned and set down his carefully kept double-barrelled gun against the rough trellis-work; as, at the sound of his foot, there arose from a long, moss-covered, barn-like building, a tremendous barking and yelping.

'Now then: that'll do!' he shouted, as he walked towards the great double door, which was dotted with the mortal remains of what he termed 'varmin'— to wit, the nailed-up bodies of stoats, weasels, hawks, owls, magpies and jays, all set down as being the deadly enemies of the game he reared and preserved

for Mrs Rolph at The Warren. But even these were not the most deadly enemies of the pheasants and partridges, Thoreby Wood being haunted by sundry ne'er-do-weels who levied toll there, in spite of all Ben Hayle's efforts and the stern repression of the County Bench.

'May as well stick you up too,' said Ben, as he took a glossy-skinned polecat from where he had thrown it that morning, after taking it from a trap.

He opened one of the doors, and two Gordon setters and a big black retriever bounded out, to leap up, dance around him, and make efforts, in dog-like fashion, to show their delight and anxiety to be at liberty once more.

'Down, Bess! Down, Juno! Steady, Sandy! Quiet! Good dogs, then,' he cried, as he entered the barn, took a hammer from where it hung, and a nail from a rough shelf, and with the dogs looking on after sniffing at the polecat, as if they took human interest in the proceeding, he nailed the unfortunate, ill-odoured little beast side by side with the last gibbeted offender, a fine old chinchilla-coated grey rat.

''Most a pity one can't serve Master Caleb Kent the same. Dunno, though,' he added with a chuckle. 'Time was—that was years ago, though, and nobody can't say I've done badly since. But I did hope we'd seen the last of Master Caleb.'

Ben Hayle took off his black felt hat, and gave his

dark, grizzled hair a scratch, and his face puckered up as he put away the hammer, to stand thinking.

'No, hang him, he wouldn't dare!'

Ben walked back to the porch to take up his gun, and a look of pride came to brighten his face, as just then a figure appeared in the porch in the shape of Judith Hayle, a tall, dark-eyed girl of twenty, strikingly like her father, and, as she stood framed in the entrance, she well warranted the keeper's look of pride.

'Are you going far?'

''Bout the usual round, my dear. Why, Judy, the place don't seem to be the same with you back home. But it is dull for you, eh?'

'Dull, father? No,' said the girl laughing.

'Oh, I dunno. After your fine ways up at The Warren with Miss Marjorie and the missus, it must seem a big drop down to be here again.'

'Don't, father. You know I was never so happy anywhere as here.'

'But you are grown such a lady now; I'm 'most afraid of you.'

'No you are not. I sometimes wish that Mrs Rolph had never had me at the house.'

'Why?'

'Because it makes you talk to me like that.'

'Well, then, I won't say another word. There, I must be off, but—'

He hesitated as if in doubt.

'Yes, father.'

'Well, I was only going to say, I see young Caleb has come back to the village, and knowing how he once—'

'Come back, father!' cried Judith, with a look of alarm.

'Yes, I thought I'd tell you; but I don't think he'll come nigh here again.'

'Oh, no, father, I hope not,' said the girl, looking thoughtfully towards the wood, with her brows knitting.

'He'd better not,' said the keeper, picking up and tapping the butt of his gun. 'Might get peppered with number six. Good-bye, my dear.'

He kissed her, walked to the edge of the dense fir wood, gave a look back at the figure by the porch, and then plunged in among the bushes and disappeared, closely followed by the eager dogs, while Judith stood frowning at the place where he had disappeared.

'I wish father wouldn't be so close,' thought the girl. 'He must know why I'm sent back home. It wasn't my fault; I never tried; but he was always after me. Oh, how spiteful Miss Madge did look.'

She went into the cottage to stand by the well-polished grate, her hand resting upon the mantelpiece, whose ornaments were various fittings and articles belonging to the gamekeeper's craft, above which, resting in well-made iron racks, were a couple

of carefully cared-for guns ; one an old flint-lock fowling-piece, the other a strong single-barrel, used for heavier work, and in which the keeper took special pride.

'Caleb,' she said with a shudder, 'come back! Well, I was so young then.'

As Ben Hayle went thoughtfully along the path, trying to fit into their places certain matters which troubled him, the man of whom they had both been thinking was near at hand, so that, as the gamekeeper was saying to himself,—'Yes: it's because young squire come home to stay that the missus has sent her back,'—Caleb Kent stood before him in the path, the dogs giving the first notice of his presence by dashing forward, uttering low growls, and slipping round the slight, dark, good-looking, gipsy-like fellow coming in the opposite direction.

'Hallo, you, sir!' said the keeper sharply.

'And hallo, you, sir!' retorted the young man, showing his white teeth as he thrust his hands far down in his cord breeches pockets, and, as he stopped, passing one cord legging over the other.

'What are you doing here?'

'Looking at you, Ben Hayle. Path's free for me as it is for you. No, I aren't got a gun in two pieces in my pockets. You needn't look. You know how that's done.'

'If I'd been you, I'd ha' stopped away altogether,' said the keeper, 'and not come back here, where nobody wants you.'

'Pity you weren't me. Six months' hard would have done you good once more.'

'When I get six months' imprisonment, it won't be for night poaching, but for putting a charge of shot in you, you lunging hound. And don't you let that tongue of yours wag so fast, young man. I'm not ashamed of it. Everyone knows I did a bit of poaching when I was a young fool, and did my bit in quod for that trouble with the keepers. But they know too that, when I came out, and the captain's father come to me and said, "Drop it, my lad, and be an honest man," I said I would, and served him faithful; so shut your mouth before I do it with the stock of my gun.'

'All right, mate, don't be waxey. Look here:—s'pose I turn honest too.'

'You!' said the keeper, scornfully.

'Yes, me; and marry Judy.'

'That'll do,' cried the keeper sharply.

'No it won't, we're old sweethearts—Judy and me.'

'That'll do, I say. Now, cut.'

'When I like,' said the man, with a sneer. 'Better let me marry her; the captain won't.'

The keeper caught him by the throat.

'Will you keep that cursed tongue still!'

'No, I won't,' cried the young man fiercely, and with a savage look in his eyes. 'I know, even if I have been away. I know all about it. But I'm in that little flutter, Ben Hayle.'

'Curse you! hold your tongue, will you,' roared the keeper; and the dogs began to bark fiercely as he forced the young poacher back against a tree, but only to release him, as a quick sharp voice, called to the dogs, which dashed up to the new-comer, leaping to be caressed.

'Hallo! what's up? You here again?'

Captain Robert Rolph, of The Warren, and of Her Majesty's 20th Dragoon Guards, a well-set-up, athletic-looking fellow, scowled at the poacher, and the colour came a little into his cheeks.

'Oh yes, I'm back again, master.'

'Then take my advice, sir; go away again to somewhere at a distance.'

The young man gave him a sidelong glance, and laughed unpleasantly.

'Look here, Caleb Kent: you're a smart-looking fellow. Go up to Trafalgar Square. You'll find one of our sergeants there. Take the shilling, and they'll make a man of you. You'll be in my regiment, and I'll stand your friend.'

'Thankye for nothing, captain. 'List so as to be out of your way, eh? Not such a fool.'

'Oh, very well then, only look out, sir. I'll see that Sir John Day doesn't let you off so easily next time you're in trouble.'

'Ketch me first,' said the young man; and giving the pair an ugly, unpleasant look, he walked away.

'Not me,' he muttered. 'I haven't done yet; wait a bit.'

'No good, sir,' said the keeper, looking after the young poacher till he was out of sight. 'Bad blood, sir; bad blood.'

'Yes, I'm afraid so. Morning, Hayle. Er—Miss Hayle quite well?'

'Yes sir, thank you kindly,' said the keeper; and then, as the captain walked away, he trudged on through the woods, talking to himself.

'*Miss Hayle*,' he said, and he turned a bit red in the face. 'Well, she is good enow for him or any man; but no, no, that would never do. Don't be a fool, Ben, my lad: you don't want trouble to come. Trouble,' he muttered, as he half cocked his gun, 'why, I'd—bah!' he ejaculated, cooling down; 'what's the good o' thinking things like that? Better pepper young Caleb. D—n him! he set me thinking it. Captain's right enough. I like a man who's fond of a bit of sport.'

As it happened, Captain Rolph was thinking, in a somewhat similar vein, of poachers and dark nights, and opportunities for using a gun upon unpleasant people. But these thoughts were pervaded, too, with bright eyes and cheeks, and he said to himself,—

'He'd better; awkward for him if he does.'

CHAPTER II.

MARS ON THE HORIZON.

In the drawing-room at The Warren, Mrs Rolph, a handsome, dignified lady of five-and-forty, was sitting back, with her brows knit, looking frowningly at a young and pretty girl of nineteen, whose eyes were puzzling, for in one light they seemed beautiful, in another shifting. She was a Rosetti-ish style of girl, with too much neck, a tangle of dark red hair, and lips of that peculiar pout seen in the above artist's pictures, in conjunction with heavily-lidded eyes, and suggesting at one moment infantile retractation from a feeding-bottle, at another parting from the last kiss. There was a want of frankness in her countenance that would have struck a stranger at once, till she spoke, when the soft, winning coo of her voice proved an advocate which made the disingenuous looks and words fade into insignificance.

Her voice sounded very sweet and low now, as she said softly,—

'Are you not judging dear Robert too hardly, aunt?'

'No, Madge, no. It is as plain as can be; he thinks

of nothing else when he comes home—he, a man to whom any alliance is open, to be taken in like that by a keeper's—an ex-poacher's daughter.'

'Judith is very lady-like and sweet,' said Marjorie softly, as if to herself.

'Madge, do you want to make me angry?' cried Mrs Rolph, indignantly. 'Shame upon you! And it is partly your fault. You have been so cold and distant with him, when a few gentle words would have brought him to your side.'

'I am sure you would not have liked me to be different towards him. You would not have had me throw myself at his feet.'

The words were as gentle-sounding as could be, but all the same there was a suggestion of strength behind, if the speaker cared to exert it.

'No, no, it is not your fault, my dear,' cried Mrs Rolph, angrily; 'it is mine, I can see it all now. It was a foolish mistake having her here. Educating a girl like that is a great error, and I see it now that it is too late. Oh, Madge, dear, if I could see him happily wedded to you, how different things might be. But I declare that nothing shall ever induce me to consent. If he will go on in utter rebellion to his mother, he must do so.'

'But is it too late, aunt?'

'Unless you rouse yourself up to the position, act like a woman of the world, and drag him from this wretched girl. Oh, it is too disgraceful. If I had only

thought to send her away before his regiment was quartered so near.'

'Yes,' said Marjorie, musingly, 'but it is too late now.'

'Then you will not try?'

'I did not say so. Here he is.'

There was a step in the hall, the sound of a stick being thrust carelessly into a stand, and, directly after, Rolph tramped into the room.

'Ah, Madge,' he said, in a careless, easy way; and, ignoring the smile of welcome with which she greeted him, he walked across to his mother's chair.

'Well,' he said, 'how is the head?' and he stooped down and kissed her brow.

'Not at all well, my dear,' she said affectionately. 'I think I will go up to my room.'

'Have a drive, dear; I'll order the tandem out.'

'No, no, my dear, I shall be better soon.'

She rose, kissed him, and left the room.

'Dodge to leave Madge and me together,' muttered the young man. 'All right. Bring things to a climax.'

'How very little we see of you, Robert,' said Madge softly. 'So much training?'

'Health. Shows how wise I have grown. I'm like pepper; a little of me is very nice—too much an abomination.'

Marjorie sighed.

'Hallo! Been reading poetry?'

'No,' said the girl, in a low, pained voice. 'I was thinking.'

'Thinking, eh? What about?'

'Of how changed you are from the nice frank boy who used to be so loving and tender.'

'Ah, I was rather a milksop, Madge; wasn't I?'

'I never thought so; and it pains me to hear you speak so harshly of yourself. What has made you alter so?'

'Ask Dame Nature. I was a boy; now I am a man.'

Marjorie sighed, and gave him a long, sad look.

'Well,' he said, 'what is the matter?'

She looked at him again, long and wistfully.

'As if you did not know,' she said.

'Know? How should I know?'

'Then I'll tell you,' she cried quickly.

'No, no; confide in some lady friend.'

'Robert,' she said, in a low, husky voice, and her whole manner changed, her eyes flashed and the lines about her lips grew hard. 'What have I done that you should treat me like this?'

'Done? Nothing.'

'Then why have you turned so cold and hard to me?'

'I am the same to you to-day that I have always been.'

'It is not true,' she whispered, with her voice full

of intensity of feeling, 'you left no stone unturned to make me believe you cared for me.'

'Nonsense! Why—'

'Silence! You shall hear me now,' she continued, with her excitement growing. 'I resisted all this till you almost forced me to care for you. You even make me now confess it in this shameless way, and, when you feel that you are the master, you play with me—trifle with my best feelings.'

'Gammon! Madge, what is the matter with you? I never dreamed of such a thing.'

'What!'

'Are you going mad?'

'Yes,' she cried passionately, 'driven so by you. It is shameful. I could not have believed the man lived who would have treated a woman so basely. But I am not blind. There is a reason for it all.'

'What do you mean?'

'Do you think me a child? I am to be won and then tossed aside for the new love—fancy, the poacher's daughter, and when—'

'Don't be a fool, Madge. You are saying words now that you will repent.'

'I'll say them,' she cried, half wild with jealous rage, and her words sounding the more intense from their being uttered in a low, harsh whisper, 'if I die for it. The gamekeeper's daughter, the girl taken in here by your mother out of charity.'

'Madge!'

'Who is to be the next favourite, when you are weary of your last conquest—one of the kitchen wenches?'

'Perhaps,' he said coolly.

'Rob! Have you no heart that you treat me as you do?'

'I never thought, never said a word to make you think I meant—er—marriage.'

'Think you meant marriage?' she whispered. 'I did love you as dearly as I hate you now for your heartless cruelty to me. But you shall repent it—repent it bitterly.'

'Look here,' he said roughly; 'for years past we have lived in this house like brother and sister, and I won't have you speak like this. Does my mother know?'

'Ask her.'

'Bah!'

'You dare not ask her what she thinks or whether she approves of your choice. Captain Rolph in love with the gamekeeper's daughter! Is she to be taken to the county ball, and introduced to society? And is she to wear the family diamonds? Judith—Judy—the miserable, low-bred—'

'Here, hold hard!'

Marjorie Emlin stopped short, startled into silence by the furious look and tone she had evoked. The young man had listened, and from time to time had made deprecating movements to try and turn away

the furious woman's wrath till she had made this last attack, when he glared with a rage so overpowering that she shrank from him.

'You have done well,' he said. 'My mother looks upon you as a daughter. I have always been to you as a brother.'

'It is not true,' she said, as she stood quivering with fear and rage before him, trying to meet his eye. Then, with a low cry, full of vindictive passion, she struck at him, and ran out of the room.

'Curse the girl!' growled Rolph. 'I wish women wouldn't be such fools. A kiss and a few warm words, and then, hang 'em! you're expected to marry 'em. Man can't marry every pretty girl he kisses. They want a missionary among 'em to tell 'em this isn't Turkey. If there's much more of it, I'm off back to Aldershot. No, I'm not,' he added, with a half laugh, 'not yet— Hallo, mother! You?'

'Yes, my boy. I saw Madge go out just now, looking wild and excited. Rob, dear, you have been speaking to her?'

'Well, I suppose so,' he said bitterly.

'And you have told her you love her?—asked her to be your wife?'

'Good heavens, mother! are you gone mad too?—Madge—I never dreamed of such a thing.'

'Why?' said Mrs Rolph, with a strange coldness.

'Because—because—'

'Yes; because you have taken a fancy to another,'

said Mrs Rolph sternly. 'Robert, my son, it is not I who am mad, but you. Have you thought well over all this?'

'Don't ask questions,' he said sulkily.

'I am your mother, sir, and I assert my right to question you on such a matter as this, as your poor father would have questioned you. But there is no need. I have done wrong, and yet I cannot blame myself, for how could I, his mother, know that my son would act otherwise than as a gentleman.'

'Well, I never do.'

'It is false. When Mary Hayle died, I bade her go in peace, for I would try to be a mother to the orphaned girl. Heaven knows, I tried to be. I brought her here, and made her the humble companion of your cousin Madge. She shared her lessons; she was taught everything, that she might be able to earn her own livelihood as a governess.'

'Well, I know all that.'

'To be treated with ingratitude. My foolish son, when he comes home, must allow himself to be enmeshed by a cunning and deceitful woman.'

'What bosh, mother!'

'But it is true. You do not dare to tell me you do not love Judith Hayle?'

'There is no dare in question. I like the girl.'

'Unhappy boy! and she has led you on.'

Captain Rolph whistled.

'Any telegram come for me? I sent a man to Brackley.'

'Telegram!'

'Yes. I want to know about the foot-race at Lilley Bridge.'

Mrs Rolph gave her foot an impatient stamp.

'Listen to me, sir. This is no time for thinking about low sports.'

'Hallo? Low?'

'Yes, sir; low. I have never interfered when I saw you taking so much interest in these pursuits. My son, I said to our friends, is an officer and a gentleman, and if he likes to encourage athleticism in the country by his presence at these meetings, he has a right to do so; but I have not liked it, though I have been silent. You know I have never interfered about your relaxations.'

'No; you've been a splendid mater,' he said laughingly.

'And I have been proud of my manly son; but when I see him stooping to folly—'

'Misapplied quotation, mater—when lovely woman stoops to folly.'

'Be serious, sir. I will not have you degrade yourself in the eyes of the neighbourhood by such conduct, for it means disgrace. What would the Days say—Sir John and Glynne? If it had been she, I would not have cared.'

'Let the Days be,' he said gruffly.

'I will,' said Mrs Rolph; 'but listen, Rob, dear; think of poor Madge.'

'Hang poor Madge! Look here, once for all, mother; I'm not a witch in Macbeth. I don't want three ounces of a red-haired wench—nor seven stone neither.'

'Rob! Shame!'

'I'm not going to have Madge rammed down my throat. If I'm to marry, she's not in the running.'

'What? when you know my wishes?'

'Man marries to satisfy his own wishes, not his mother's. I have other ideas.'

'Then what are they, sir?' said Mrs Rolph scornfully.

'That's my business,' he said, taking out his cigar-case.

'Then, am I to understand that you intend to form an alliance with the family of our keeper?' said Mrs Rolph sarcastically.

'Bah!' roared her son fiercely; and he strode out of the room and banged the door.

'Gone!' cried Mrs Rolph, wringing her hands and making her rings crackle one against the other. 'I was mad to have the wretched girl here. What fools we women are.'

Her son was saying precisely the same as he marched away.

'Does she think me mad?' he growled. 'Marry freckle-faced Madge!—form an alliance with Ben

Hayle's Judy! Not quite such a fool. I'll go and do it, and show the old girl a trick worth two of that. She's as clean-limbed a girl as ever stepped, and there's a look of breed in her that I like. Must marry, I suppose. Ck! For the sake of the estate, join the two then—I will—at once. It will stop their mouths at home, and make an end of the Madge business. She'll be all right, and begin kissing and hugging her and calling her dearest in a week. That's the way to clear that hedge, so here goes.

He stopped, took a short run and cleared the hedge at the side of the lane in reality to begin with, before striking off through one of the adjacent fir woods, so as to reach the sandy lanes and wild common on the way to Brackley.

CHAPTER III.

CONCERNING VIRGO AND GEMINI.

'AND what does Glynne say?'

'Well, Sir John, she don't say much; it isn't her way to say a deal.'

'Humph! No; you're quite right. But I should have thought that she would have said a good deal upon an occasion like this.'

'Yes, I thought she would have roused up a little more; but she has been very quiet ever since I went into training for the event.'

'Hang it all, Rolph, don't talk about marriage as if it were a bit of athletic sport.'

'No, of course not. It was a slip.'

'Well, tell me what she did say.'

'That I was to talk to you.'

'Humph! Well, you have talked to me, and I don't know what to say.'

'Say *yes*, sir, and then the event's fixed.'

'Ex-actly, my dear boy, but I might say *yes*, and repent.'

'Oh no, you won't, sir, I'm precious fond of her; I am, indeed. Have been since a boy.'

'No one could know my daughter without being fond of her,' said Sir John stiffly.

'Of course not; and that's why I want to make sure.'

'Humph!' ejaculated Sir John. 'You've a good income, my boy, and you're a fine, sound fellow; but I don't much like the idea of my little Glynne marrying into the army.'

'Oh, but I shall only stay in till I get my commission as major; and then I mean to retire and become a country squire.'

'Humph! yes; and go in more for athleticism, I suppose.'

'Well, I think an English country gentleman ought to foster the sports and pastimes of his native land—the hunt, the race meetings, and that sort of thing.'

'Humph! Do you? Well, I think, my boy, that we ought to take to agriculture and the improvement of stock. But there, I daresay you'll tone down.'

'Then you have no objection, Sir John?'

'Who?—I? None at all, my boy; I liked your father, and I hope you'll make her a good husband—as good a husband as I did my poor wife; though, as the common folk say, I say it as shouldn't say it. Now then, have you any more questions to ask?'

'No, I don't think I have. Of course I'm very happy and that sort of thing. A fellow is sure to be at such a time, you know.'

'Yes, yes, of course. To be sure. Then that's all is it?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Don't want to ask questions about settlements, eh?'

'No, I don't want to ask any questions. I want Glynne, and you say I may have her; so that's all.'

'Come along then, and see my pigs.'

Captain Robert Rolph looked a little chagrined at the suggestion respecting pigs; but he concealed his annoyance and walked briskly on beside his companion, Sir John Day, Bart. of Brackley Hall, Surrey, a grey, florid, stoutly-built gentleman, whose aspect betokened much of his time being spent in the open air. He was an intent, bright, bustling-looking man, with grey, mutton-chop whiskers; and his drab-cord trousers, brown velveteen coat and low-crowned, grey hat, gave quite a country squire, country-town-bench turn to his appearance.

'I've great faith in these pigs,' he said, sharply. 'Been at a deal of trouble to get hold of the breed, and if I don't take a cup at the Agricultural Show this year, I shall be down upon some of those judges —in the *Times*.'

'Ah, 'tis disappointing when you've set your mind upon a cup and don't get it,' said the captain. 'How many have you won, Sir John?'

'What, cups? Thirty-four, my boy, thirty-four.'

'Ah, I've got fifty,' said the captain, with a touch of pride in his tone. 'When I go in training for anything, I always say to myself, I shall put it off, and I pretty generally do.'

'Humph! yes,' said Sir John, shortly; 'so I suppose. Oh, by the way though, Rolph, you'd oblige me very much by going back to the house. I'll show you the pigs another day.'

'Certainly, certainly,' said the young man with alacrity.

'You see there's my brother. He thinks a great deal of Glynne, and I never like to take any important step in life without consulting him. Do you understand?'

'Well—er, not exactly.'

'Oh, I mean, just go back and see him, and say what you did to me just now.'

'What! Do you mean I must ask his consent, Sir John?' cried the young man, aghast.

'No, no, no! of course not, my dear boy. Tell him I've given mine, and that it's all settled, and that you hope he approves, and—you know what to say. He'll like it. Be right, you see. Captain to senior officer, eh? There, be off, and get it over. I must go on and see the pigs.'

'Confound the major!' said Captain Rolph, as he stopped, looking after the brisk retreating figure of the baronet. 'He'll want me to ask the housekeeper next. Hang it all! it's almost worth more than the stakes. I did think I'd got it over. The old major's as peppery as a curry. He'll want to order me under arrest if he doesn't like the engagement. Well, here goes to get it over. Let's see; just a mile to the park gates. Pity to waste it.'

He glanced round to see if there was anyone near, but he was quite alone on the hard, sandy, retired road ; so, buttoning his well-cut morning coat tightly across his chest, he tucked up his cuffs and the bottoms of his trousers, selected two smooth pebbles about as large as kidneys from a stone heap, clasped one firmly in each hand, and then thrust one in his pocket for a moment while he referred to a stop watch, replaced it, took hold of the stone once more, and then, throwing himself into position, the gentlemanly officer seemed to subside into the low-type professional walking or running man.

For a few moments he remained motionless in a statuesque attitude, his brow all in wrinkles, his teeth set, lips tight, and his chest expanded and thrown forward as if he were waiting the order to start. Then he cried, 'Off!' and bounded away at a rapid rate, running hard till he reached the park gates at Brackley, where he stopped short, threw away the stones, referred to his watch, and nodded and smiled as he drew himself up—the stiff, military officer once more.

'Not bad,' he said, 'and as fresh as a daisy. I could have done it in half a minute less. Now, I'll go and see the old man.'

Captain Rolph did not 'see the old man' then, for when he reached the house, the old man—that is to say, Major Day, formerly of a lancer regiment that took part in several engagements in the Sikh war,

but who had long since hung up his sabre in his bedroom at Brackley—was out for a morning walk, following a pursuit in which he took great delight—to wit, gathering fungi, a family of plants that he made his study, and he was coming back with a small, bright trowel in one hand, his stout stick in the other, and a large salmon creel slung from his shoulder, when he encountered his brother, the baronet, striding away to his model farm.

Major Day was a fierce-looking, smart, officer-like man of sixty, with curly grey hair that stood out from his well-shaped head, piercing eyes, heavy dark brows, and a massive, zebra-patterned moustache, the rest of his face being closely shaven.

Perhaps 'zebra-patterned' is an unusual term to give to a cavalry moustache; but this was regularly striped in black and silver grey, giving a peculiar aspect to the keen, upright, military man.

'Halt!' shouted the major. 'Hallo, Jack, going to see the pigs?'

'Yes. Thought you were at home. Just sent Rolph to speak to you.'

'To speak to me? What about?'

'Oh, I thought it best, you see, being my brother, and—er—as you like Glynne, and—er—'

'What in the name of fortune are you stammering about, Jack?' said the major, sharply. 'Why, you don't mean—'

'That he has proposed for Glynne.'

'D—n his impudence!'

'Don't talk nonsense, Jem,' said the baronet, testily. 'He has proposed, and I have given my consent.'

'But I always thought he was to marry that second cousin, Marjorie Emlin.'

'Doesn't look like it. Never seemed very warm when they dined here.'

'But—but it's so unexpected, so sudden. And Glynne?' cried the major, flushing, and bringing his heavy brows down over his eyes; 'she hasn't accepted him?'

'Why, of course she has. Don't be a fool, Jem,' cried the baronet, angrily.

'Fool! It's enough to make any man a fool. What does that fellow want with a wife—to take gate-money at some meeting?'

'I do wish you wouldn't be so prejudiced, Jem.'

'To hold the tape when he's coming in after a foot-race?'

'Hang it all, Jem, do be sensible.'

'To feed him with raw steaks when he is in training?' continued the major, ironically. 'To keep time, and polish his cups, and mind that he does not break the rules of his trainer? Good heavens! Jack, why, both you and Glynne must be mad.'

'Indeed!' said the baronet, hotly. 'I don't see any madness in giving my consent to my child's accepting the son of an old neighbour, a confoundedly fine fellow, of good birth, and with four thousand a year.'

'I don't care if he were better of birth, and had twenty thousand a year. He wouldn't be a fit husband for our Glynne.'

'Well, no,' said the baronet, proudly. 'No man would be sufficiently good for her.'

'Who's talking nonsense now?' cried the major. 'There are lots of good fellows in the world if she wants a husband, but I don't believe she does.'

'But she has accepted him.'

'Silly girl. Bit taken with the fine-looking fellow, that's all. Don't know her own mind yet. This is springing a mine.'

'Ah well, the thing's settled, so you may just as well retreat from your position, Jem.'

'But I shall not retreat, sir. I shall hold my position as long as I can, and when I am driven back, I shall do my duty as one in command of a light cavalry regiment should: I shall harass the enemy's flanks and rear. He'll get no rest from me.'

'Hang it all, Jem, don't do that—don't be rude to the young fellow,' cried the baronet in dismay.

'I—I don't approve of it at all, Jack. I don't really.'

'But the thing's done, man—the thing's done.'

'Then why do you send the fellow to me?'

'Well, I thought it would be a bit civil to you, Jem, and respectful, and—'

'It is not either,' cried the major. 'I look upon it,

knowing as you do how I am attached to Glynne, as a regular insult.'

'Now, what nonsense, Jem.'

'It is not nonsense, Jack. The fellow is a mere machine—a good-looking, well-built machine, with not a thought above low-class foot races, and training, and rowing, and football, and cricket.'

'And not bad things either,' said the baronet, hotly.

'No, sir,' replied the major, drawing himself up, 'not bad things, but good things if a young man takes to them as amusements to keep his nature in subjection, and to bring it to its finest state of development, that he may have a sound brain in a sound body.'

'Hear, hear!' cried Sir John.

'But bad, rotten, and blackguardly things when a man gives the whole of his mind to them, and has no more ambition than leads him to be the winner of a cup in a walking match.'

'Oh, rubbish!' cried the baronet, warmly. 'Rolph's a gentleman.'

'Then he's a confoundedly bad specimen of the class, Jack.'

'You're as prejudiced as an old woman, Jem,' cried the baronet, angrily.

'Perhaps I am,' replied his brother: 'but it isn't prejudice to see that this fellow can't talk to a girl on any subject but athletics. I haven't patience with him. I always hated to see him here.'

'And I haven't patience with you, Jem; 'pon my honour, I haven't. Why, what next? Here, out of respect to you as my brother, I sent my daughter's future husband to you, and you tell me to my face that you will insult him. I won't have it, sir; I say I won't have it. You're intolerable. You're getting beyond bearing, and—and—confound it all, I will not have it! Pretty thing, indeed, when a man mayn't choose a husband for his own child.'

The baronet took a few strides this way and that way, grew scarlet as he spoke, and ended by taking off his grey hat and dabbing his shining forehead.

'I've too much love for Glynne, and too much respect for her mother's memory to stand by silently and see such a miserable bargain concluded; and I enter my protest against what must turn out an unhappy match,' said the major.

'It will turn out nothing of the sort, sir,' cried the baronet, hotly; 'and, look here, Jem, it's time we came to an understanding. I will not have your dictatorial mess-room manners brought into my establishment; and I tell you once for all, if you can't conform to the simple home life of a country squire's house, the sooner you go, sir, the better.'

The major stuck his stick into the turf with a furious stab, as if he had a feud with mother earth; then, dragging round the creel he banged the bright trowel with which he had been gesticulating into the

basket, and giving the wicker a swing back, caught up his stick and strode away without a word.

'Confound his insolence!' cried Sir John furiously, 'I won't have it. My own brother: my junior by two hours! A man who has been petted and pampered too, because—because he is my brother—because he has been in the wars—because—because—because he is—my brother—because—hang it all!' he roared, stamping heavily on the turf. 'What an abominably hasty temper I have got. He'll pack up and go, and —here!—hi!—Jem!—Jem!'

The baronet was stout, but it was the active, muscular stoutness of a man constantly in the open air: he did not suffer from the abnormal size of that which Punch's fashionable tailor called his middle-aged customer's chest, so that it required little effort on his part to set off at a trot after his brother, who heard his shouts and his pursuing steps, but paid no heed to each summons; for, with head erect, and his stick carried as a military man bears his sabre on the route, he marched steadily on with the regular swinging pace of a well-drilled soldier.

'Jem! Hold hard! Jem, old fellow,' cried the baronet, overtaking him; but the major kept on without turning his head.

'Jem! Here, I beg your pardon. I lost my temper. I'm a passionate old fool.'

Still there was no response, and the major passed on; but his brother now took tight hold of his arm.

'Jem! Come, I say. Don't you hear me? I beg your pardon, I say. Hang it all, old boy, do you want me to go down upon my knees.'

'No, Jack,' cried the major, stopping short and facing him, 'I don't; but you told me I'd better go.'

'Yes: in a passion; but you know I don't mean what I say. Here, shake hands, old boy. I say, though, what a peppery old fire-eater you are!'

'Am I, Jack?' said the major, with a grim smile.

'No, no; I mean I am. Look here, old chap, I'm sure there's a membrane, or a strap, or a nerve, or something of that sort, given way inside me. It lets my temper out, and then I say things I don't mean.'

'It must have given way a great many years ago, Jack,' said the major, drily.

'Oh, come, Jem! Hang it all, old fellow, I've begged your pardon. I've humbled myself to you. Don't jump on a man when he's down. 'Tisn't chivalrous; it isn't indeed.'

'Then you don't want me to go?'

'Go? Now look here, Jem, do try and be reasonable. What should I do without you?'

'Well then, I'll stop this time; but really, Jack, if ever you insult me again like that, I can have my old chambers in St James's, close to the club, and I shall go back to town.'

'Go along with you!' cried Sir John. 'Don't talk nonsense. We're getting old boys now, Jem, and you'll stop along with me to the end.'

'Yes, we're getting old, Jack, very fast indeed,' said the major, as his brother laid a hand affectionately upon his shoulder just as he used in old school-boy days; 'time gallops away now.'

'Ay, it does; and that's why I can't help feeling a bit anxious about seeing Glynne happily settled in life.'

'And it ought to make you the more particular about—'

'Hush!' cried the baronet, interrupting him sharply, 'the girls! Oh, hang it! how can Glynne be so absurd.'

CHAPTER IV.

SERPENS.

SIR JOHN and his brother had just reached an opening in Brackley Wood, a fine old pheasant preserve, when the former became aware of the fact that his child and the lady whom she had of late made her companion and friend, were seated in the shade cast by a venerable oak, Glynne painting in front of her easel, upon which were the skilful beginnings of an oil picture representing a rough looking gipsy seated upon a tree stump, in the act of carving the knob of a stick with his long Spanish knife, while Lucy Alleyne, the friend, was reading from a book resting upon her knees.

The group formed a pretty enough natural picture, upon which a silvery rain of sunshine was poured through the dense foliage of the overhanging boughs, for, without being classically beautiful, Glynne Day was as fair a specimen of a young English lady as a country visitor would be likely to see in one twenty-four hours. Her's was the kind of face with its sweet, calm, placid repose that asked for a second look and then for a third ; and when this was complete, he who

gazed, old or young, wanted to look again, and so on, in never tiring mood. It was not that her soft, abundant brown hair was so remarkable, nor that her face was so perfect an oval, nor her nose so true an aquiline, nor her eyes so dark a grey; but it was the completeness of the whole countenance, the elasticity of the step that bore onward so tall and graceful a figure, while the sweet repose of the face would have warranted anyone in taking the major's side when he declared that no pulse in her frame had ever yet been quickened by the thought of love.

Glynne's companion, Lucy Alleyne, also possessed her share of attractions; but they were cast in a very different mould, for she was dark, large-eyed, little and piquante, with an arch expression about her bow-like mouth that told of suppressed merriment, and a readiness to join in anything that promised laughter, or, as she would have called it, a bit of fun.

The other figure in the group—the model, whose counterfeit presentment was being transferred to canvas, first heard the steps; and he looked up sharply, in a wild, danger-fearing way, as a weasel might, and seemed about to spring to his feet and start off; but a peculiar leer crossed his face, and he half closed his eyes and sat firm as the brothers came up, both glancing at him sourly, the major taking a tighter grip of his stick.

'Ah, my dears!' said Sir John, gruffly, ''most done, Glynne?'

'Yes, papa, quite, for to-day,' said the lady addressed, opening her purse and taking out half-a-crown, the sight of which made the model's eyes open a little wider as it was held out to him, while an unpleasant animal look was darted at Glynne as she spoke. 'That will do for to-day. I will send word by the policeman when I want you again.'

'Thankye kindly, my lady,' said the young man, wincing at the name of the messenger; and he now touched his hat to Sir John humbly, and then to his brother.

'You're back again, then, Caleb Kent,' growled Sir John.

'Yes, sir, I've come back,' whined the man.

'Then, just see if you can't lead a decent life, sir, for I warn you, that if you are brought up again for poaching, it will go pretty hard with you.'

'Yes, sir; I know, sir, but I'm going to reform, sir, and turn keeper, and—'

'That'll do. Be off. Let's have deeds, not words.'

'Yes, sir, I will, sir. I'm a-goin' to try, sir.'

'I said that will do.'

'Yes, sir,' said the man, humbly; and, touching his cap all round, he slouched off, with an ill-used look, and gave two or three loud sniffs.

'Oh, papa, dear,' cried Glynne, 'how can you speak so harshly to the poor fellow. He did wrong once, and he has been punished.'

'Did wrong once. Bah! He did wrong in being

born, and has done wrong ever since. The fellow's a regular gaol-bird, and I don't like to see him near you. For goodness' sake, my dear, if you must paint, paint something decent, not a scoundrel like that.'

'Your father's quite right, my dear,' said the major, grimly. 'That's not the sort of fellow to paint. Whitewashing is what he wants.'

Sir John chuckled, and his child looked at him, wonderingly.

'But he is so picturesque, papa, dear, and when I get the canvas finished—'

'Oh, you don't want to finish canvases, pet. Let that go. Plenty else to think of now, eh, Miss Alleyne? Why, my dear, you have a colour like a peach.'

'Have I, Sir John?' said the girl, demurely. 'How shockingly vulgar! Then I must wear a veil.'

'For goodness' sake, don't, my dear child,' cried the baronet, hastily. 'Pray, don't insult poor nature by refusing to look healthy and well.'

'I join in my brother's prayer,' said the major, as he shook hands in a quiet, old-fashioned, chivalrous way.

'And so do I,' said Glynne, smiling in a calm, strangely placid manner. 'Do you know, Lucy, I've been enjoying your colour as I painted.'

'James, old fellow,' said the baronet, laughing, 'let's be in the fashion. How handsome you do look this morning. How your hair curls.'

'Uncle always looks handsome,' said Glynne, seriously, and she sent a thrill of pleasure through the old man, by quietly taking his arm and leaning towards him in a gentle, affectionate way.

'And I'm nobody, Miss Alleyne,' said Sir John with mock annoyance.

'You would not think so, if you heard all that Glynne says about you when we are alone, Sir John.'

'Oh, come, that's better,' cried the baronet, nodding and brightening up. 'Well, I must go. I suppose you will walk back with uncle, eh, Glynne?'

'Yes, papa,' said Glynne, smiling on him tenderly.

'Then, once more, here goes to see my pigs. You don't care to come, ladies?'

'No, papa, dear,' said Glynne, with the same gentle smile. 'We were going home almost directly.'

'Go along, then,' said Sir John. 'I shall be back before lunch. Morning, Miss Alleyne,' and he strode away. 'Hope he won't upset Glynne,' he muttered. 'No, I don't suppose he will say a word. Can't, as Lucy Alleyne is there. Nice little girl that, by the way.'

Sir John was wrong, for his brother did say something to Glynne—a good deal, in fact. Indeed, no sooner had the baronet gone than Lucy Alleyne exclaimed,—

'And now, dear, if you won't mind, as you have your uncle with you, I should like to run home.'

'Oh, no,' cried Glynne, 'you'll come and have lunch.'

'Not to-day, dear. Mamma will be anxious to see me back.'

'Indeed!' said Glynne, raising her eyebrows slightly.

'Yes, dear; she is a little anxious, too, about Moray; he has been working so hard lately.'

'Has he?' said Glynne, half-wonderingly, as if it seemed strange to her, in her placid existence, that people should ever work hard.

'New discovery?' said the major. 'Star-gazing?'

'I think so,' replied Lucy; 'but he is so quiet and reserved, and he does not like to speak until he is sure. If you would not mind coming round our way, I could leave you at the end of the lane.'

'Mind? No,' cried the major; 'but are you sure you will not come home with us to lunch?'

'Quite sure, please,' said Lucy.

'Then, we'll see you right to your door,' said the major, as he shouldered the little easel; 'eh, my dear?'

'Oh, yes, of course, uncle,' replied Glynne; and they continued along the side path for about a quarter of a mile, before crossing a fir wood, whose trunks rose up like so many ruddy, grey-bronze columns, while the ground was made slippery by the thick coating of pine needles beneath their feet.

'Oh, here's one of your favourites, Major Day,' cried Lucy, eagerly, as she ran on and picked a curious

grey-looking fungus, with a rough efflorescence on the top. 'No, no, don't tell me: I want to see if I recollect what it is.'

'She doesn't know, Glynne. Tell her, my dear.'

'I, uncle?' said Glynne, smiling up at him. 'You know I never recollect the names.'

'I know you won't rouse up that brain of yours to take an interest in anything,' said the major in a tone of good-tempered reproof. 'It's a great shame, when you are naturally so clever.'

'I! Clever! Oh, uncle!' said Glynne, laughing.

'I know—I remember,' cried Lucy, eagerly—'stop a moment, I have it.'

'Ha, ha, ha!' laughed the major, whose eyes sparkled with pleasure, and he seemed sufficiently animated to set a stranger wondering at an old soldier taking up with enthusiasm so strange a pursuit as that in which he engaged. 'There, you don't know, my dear, but I applaud your brave effort to remember. Someone here would not even try.'

'No, uncle, it is of no use,' said Glynne, quietly, though she evidently took an interest in her companion's enthusiastic ways.

'I do know,' said Lucy, 'and I won't be told.'

'You don't,' said the major, banteringly.

'I do,' cried Lucy. 'Yes, I have it. It's an *Amanita*.'

'Bravo!'

'*Amanita Rubescens*,' cried Lucy triumphantly; 'and if you break it the flesh turns red—there!'

'And she has broken the mushroom in half, and it has not turned red,' said the major, 'because she is wrong.'

'Oh, Major Day!' cried Lucy, 'don't say that. I am right, am I not?'

'No, my dear, not quite,' said the major, 'but very nearly. That is *Amanita Pantherinus*, a very near relative of the one I showed you yesterday.'

'But I have been trying,' cried Lucy.

'I know you have,' said the major, smiling, 'and I'm sure you can tell me what these are,' he continued, pointing to a cluster of flat, greeny-grey buttons, with dimly marked orange rings upon their surface.

'Oh yes, I know them,' cried Lucy, eagerly picking two or three from the patch of grass in an opening amongst the Scotch firs. '*Agaricus Deliciosus;* and, oh, it is getting so late. I must make haste back. I can run home now. Good-bye, Glynne; good-bye, Major Day.'

'Good-bye, little pupil,' he replied, 'and you shall have your marks although you were not right.'

'We'll stop and watch you till you are safely home,' said Glynne. 'Good-bye—good-bye.'

CHAPTER V.

VIRGO ASLEEP.

GLYNNE DAY stood with her uncle at the edge of the dark wood, where the slippery fir-needles lay thickly, and kept every blade of verdure from thrusting forth a relief to the dull, neutral grey that carpeted the ground, amid the tall, bronze-red columns. They gazed down a steep slope, and over the wild heathery waste that lay between them and what looked like a little wooded islet, rising out of the common into quite a mamelon, almost precipitous of side, and crowned with a heavy-looking edifice of brick, with other structures attached, all solid, plain, and terribly out of character with the wild landscape.

For, from where they stood, as it were on the very verge of the cultivated land, there was a stretch of miles upon miles of rolling surface, here sand, there bog, the one brown and purple with the heather or yellow with the gorse, the other in little patches of vivid green or creamy pink, where the *sphagnum* grew, and the cotton rushes had their home.

'What a desolate looking spot it is,' said the major thoughtfully, as they watched the active little figure

tripping along the sandy road; 'and yet it has its beauties after all.'

'Ye—es, I suppose it has,' said Glynne, 'but I never think about its being ugly or beautiful.'

'No, my dear, you don't,' said the major half pettishly; 'and that's what annoys me. Here you are, as beautiful a girl as well can be.'

'Am I, uncle, dear?' said Glynne, with the same calm, pleasant smile.

'Are you? Why of course you are, and with a splendid intellect, only you won't use it.'

'Don't scold me, uncle,' said the girl, creeping closer to him, 'I don't want to be clever, I don't want to know more than I know. I am so happy: why should I change?'

The old man's brow grew knotty and corrugated, partly from perplexity, partly from annoyance, and he gazed sharply down at the sweet face looking lovingly in his.

'There, there,' he said, 'I won't scold you, my darling. Look, there's little Lucy waving her handkerchief before she enters Fort Science. Fine fellow that brother of hers.'

'Yes, Mr Alleyne is nice,' said Glynne, returning her friend's salute; and then, as Lucy disappeared at the curve of a steep path that ran up the sandy mound, they turned and walked back towards the hall.

'And so you are very happy, my dear?' said the major, after a thoughtful pause.

'Oh yes, uncle, so very happy,' replied Glynne quietly. 'You and papa both love me.'

'Oh, I don't know about that,' said the major. 'I'm not so sure that I do.'

'But I am,' said the girl gently, 'quite sure. Then Lucy loves me very much, and our friends are all so kind, and even the servants always smile pleasantly when I want anything done.'

'Of course they do,' said the major, testily.

'And it sets me wondering, when people talk about sorrow, and the weariness of the world.'

'Humph! I suppose so,' the major said, stopping short; 'and how about Rolph?'

'Oh, he loves me too, uncle,' replied Glynne in the same quiet, placid tone and manner. 'I was going to tell you: he has asked me if I would be his wife.'

'And you—you have told him you would be?'

'Yes, uncle. Papa approves of it, I know; and Robert is so brave and strong and manly. Don't you think it is right?'

The major gave his hat a tilt on one side, and scratched his grey head vigorously.

'Look here, Glynne,' he cried; 'you are the most extraordinary girl I ever knew.'

'I'm very sorry, uncle,' she replied. 'I can't help being so.'

'No, no, of course not. But look here—do you love Rolph?'

'Oh yes, uncle, very much indeed.'

'How do you know you do?' cried the major, in the tone of an examiner dealing *viva voce* with a candidate for a post in the army.

'Oh, because he loves me,' said Glynne, naïvely; 'and, you see, I've known him a little ever since he was a boy.'

'Yes, but look here; what makes you love him? Have you no other reason?'

'No, uncle, dear,' said Glynne; and there was not the slightest heightening of colour, nor a trace of excitement as she spoke.

'But, my dear child,' cried the major in the most perplexed way, 'people don't fall in love like that.'

'Don't they, uncle?'

'No, no, of course not. There's a lot of passion and storm, and tempest and that sort of thing.'

'But only in books.'

'Oh, yes, in real life. I remember when I fell in love with Lady Mary Callaghan.'

'Were you really once in love, uncle?' cried Glynne with the first touch of animation that she had shown.

'Of course I was—of course—once—but it didn't come to anything. Well, there was a lot of fire and fury over that.'

'Was there, uncle?'

'Yes, to be sure. I felt as if I conldn't live without her, and she felt as if she couldn't live without me, and

we were always writing letters to one another and couldn't keep apart.'

'Oh, I never felt anything of that kind, uncle, and I rarely write letters if I can help it.'

'Then you can't be in love,' said the major triumphantly.

'But were you really in love, uncle, with Lady Mary—Mary—'

'Callaghan, my dear. Yes.'

'But you did not marry her, uncle.'

'N— no—no; you are quite right, my dear, I did not. Circumstances occurred and—er—we were not married. But really, Glynne, my dear, you are a most extraordinary girl.'

'I am very sorry.'

'Don't say that, my dear; but—er—I—er—this is a very serious thing, this promising yourself in marriage, and I—er—I—er—should like you to be perfectly sure that you are doing wisely. I think a great deal of you, my dear—old bachelor as I am, and it would trouble me more than I can say if you did not make a happy match.'

'Dear uncle,' she said tenderly, as she clasped her hands upon his arm, and clung to him more closely. 'But you need not be afraid, for Robert says he loves me very dearly, and what more could a woman desire?'

'Humph! No, of course not, my dear,' said the major, looking more perplexed than ever, as he gazed

down into the unruffled face by his side. 'Untouched, if I know anything of womankind,' he said to himself, 'but if I attempt to interfere I shall be making trouble, and upset Jack as well. What the devil shall I do?'

There came no mental answer to this self-put question, and the communings were stopped by Glynne herself, who went on thoughtfully and in the most matter-of-fact way.

'I told Robert that we must not think of being married for some time to come, and he said he was glad of that.'

'Said he was glad of it!' cried the major, looking at her aghast.

'Yes, uncle, dear. You see he has to make so many engagements beforehand. His card is quite full for matches of one kind and another.'

'Is it indeed?' said the major sarcastically.

'Yes, uncle. He has to go in training—in training—in training—for, what did he call it? Oh, I remember; in training for the various events, and he would not like to break any of them and pay forfeit.'

The major's eyes rolled in their sockets, and he seemed to be trying to swallow something that was extremely unsavoury, but he held his peace.

'He says these engagements take up a great deal of his time; but the people like him, so that he can't very well get out of them.'

'Ah, it would be a pity to disappoint them,' said

the major, while Glynne, in her happy, child-like content, did not notice his tone, but talked on as calmly as if the great event of a woman's life were a most commonplace affair, justifying to the fullest extent her uncle's idea that her heart was quite untouched.

They had spent so long over their walk that Sir John had had time to finish his visit to the pigs, and they all reached the park gates together.

'Halloa!' he exclaimed, looking inquiringly from one to the other, 'so you two have had a good talk. Here, what does your uncle say, my dear?' he continued, with a suspicious tone in his voice.

'Uncle? Say?' replied Glynne, opening her beautiful eyes a little wider. 'Oh, uncle has said very little, papa. I'm afraid I have done nothing but prattle to him all the time.'

'What about?' said her father, sharply.

'Oh, principally about my engagement,' she replied calmly.

'Well, and what does he say to it?' said Sir John, half-defiantly.

'Uncle thinks it a very serious step.'

'Yes, of course.'

'And that I ought to be careful in taking it.'

'To be sure, my dear, to be sure. Well?'

'Well, that was all, papa,' she replied. 'Lunch must be ready. I'll go in and take off my things. You are coming soon? Oh, here is Robert. I won't stop for fear of keeping you waiting.'

The captain was some fifty yards away, but Glynne did not stay. She merely waved her hand, and hurried to the front of the house, while her future lord came slowly on, whistling, with his hands in his pockets.

'You've not opposed the match, then?' whispered Sir John.

'No,' said the major, 'but I think less of it than ever.'

'Humph!' ejaculated his brother. 'Have you spoken to Rolph yet?'

'No. Haven't seen him.'

'Then, for goodness' sake, drop all prejudice, Jem, and shake hands warmly. You see they are devotedly attached.'

'No, I don't,' said the major, gruffly; 'but I'll shake hands.'

'Yes, do, Jem, do. It's the one desire of my life to see Glynne engaged to a good, manly fellow who cares for her, and, now the opportunity has come, I look to you to help me.'

'Humph!' ejaculated the major, as Rolph came up, and Sir John struck the iron while it was hot, to use his own form of expression.

'Ready for lunch, Rob?'

'Awfully,' said the captain. 'Quite an edge on.'

'That's right,' cried Sir John. 'Come along. Oh, look here though,' he added, as if upon second thoughts; 'I've had no experience before in this sort

of thing, and I want to get it over, and go on again as usual. I never do anything without telling the major here.'

Rolph bowed, and the major returned his salute stiffly.

'I've been telling him about you know what, and it's all settled now, so you can shake hands, you know.'

'Yes; my brother has told me about your proposal,' said the major, coldly. 'You have won a prize, sir, and I wish you joy.'

'Thankye, major, thankye,' cried Rolph, seizing his hand and shaking it violently. 'You don't want to say anything more to me, do you?'

'N—no,' said the major, whose inward thoughts made him look ten years older. 'N—no.'

'That's right,' cried the captain, with a sigh of relief. 'Shall we go in to lunch now, Sir John?'

'To be sure, yes, my boy. Go on. I daresay Glynne is waiting. Come along, Jem.'

He took his brother's arm; and, as the captain disappeared,—

'Thankye, Jem, thankye,' he said earnestly. 'Now for lunch. I'm as hungry as a hunter, and my mind's at rest.'

'Humph!'

CHAPTER VI.

DUST IN THE OBSERVATORY.

'WELL, Mr Oldroyd, and what do you think? Pray, tell me frankly. You have found out what is the matter with him?'

'Yes, ma'am, I think I have.'

'Then, pray, speak.'

Mrs Alleyne leaned forward with every curve in her face as well as her eyes contradicting the form of her words. 'Pray speak,' sounded and looked like a command to speak at once under pain of the lady's displeasure. She was a woman of over fifty, with white hair and high clear forehead; but what would have been a handsome face was detracted from by a pinched, care-worn expression, as if there was some great trouble upon her mind; and this trouble had soured her disposition, and made her imperious and harsh. Her cold and rather repellent manner was not softened by her formal white cap or her dress, which was a stiff, black silk, that in its old age appeared to have doubts as to whether it ought not to be a brown, save where it was relieved by white cuffs and a plain muslin kerchief, such as is seen in old

pictures, loosely crossed over the breast, and secured behind.

Neither did the room and its furnishings tend to soften matters, for, though good, everything looked worn and faded, notably the ancient Turkey carpet, and the stiff maroon curtains that had turned from red into drab, and hung limp and long beside the two tall gaunt windows, looking out upon a clump of desolate Scotch firs.

The rest of the furniture was depressing, and did not suggest comfort. The solid mahogany chairs were stiff, and the worn horse-hair coverings would have been places of torture to a child; the great dining-table was highly polished and full of reflections, but it had nothing pleasant to reflect, and whoever looked, longed to see it draped with some warm, rich cloth. While the great high-backed sideboard stood out like a polished mahogany sarcophagus upon which someone had placed a bronze funereal urn, though really inside that tomb-like structure there was a cellarette with a decanter or two of generous wine; and the bronze urn contained no ashes, merely an iron heater to make it hiss when it was used for tea.

The blank, drab-painted walls seemed to ask ap pealingly for something to ameliorate their chilling aspect; but there was no mirror, no bracket bearing bust or clock; only opposite to the windows had the appeal been heard. There, in the very worst light

for the purpose, a large picture had been hung, whose old gilt frame was tarnished and chipped, and the gloomy canvas, with its cracked varnish, had been covered by some genius of the Martin type with hundreds of figures in every conceivable posture of misery and despair. Fire was issuing from the earth, and lightnings were angularly veining the clouds, the tableau being supposed to represent the end of the world; and the consequence was that, as far as the walls were concerned, the aspect of the room was not improved.

Now, in every good dining-room, the fireside is, or should be, the most cheerful part. Prior to the days of the Georges, people knew this, and bright tiles and carvings and solid pillars gave a cheery look and countenance to the fire; and this style, thanks to the most sensible modern æsthetes, has come again into vogue, with handsome overmantels, kerbs, and dogs; but Mrs Alleyne's fireside was chilly, the fender and fire-irons were well-polished, but attenuated and of skewery form as to the latter, sharp edge as to the former, while the narrow drab shelf that formed the mantelpiece had for ornaments two obelisks that appeared to have been cast in that objectionable meat-jelly known as brawn.

It only needed the yellowish roller blinds to be drawn half-way down to make the very atmosphere seem oppressive. And this had been done, so that, as the lady of The Firs sat opposite Philip Oldroyd, the

young doctor, who was patiently trying to solve that medical problem known as making a practice in an extremely healthy district, could not help thinking to himself that the place was enough to drive a susceptible person melancholy mad.

Oldroyd did not answer for a few moments, but sat thinking, and Mrs Alleyne watched him intently, scanning his great head, and somewhat plain, but intelligent features with his deep, brown, thoughtful eyes, and closely shaven face. The latter was a sacrifice to Mrs Grundy, so that no objection should be made to his appearance by the more critical inhabitants of a narrow-minded country district, the result having been the destruction of a fine and flowing beard at the cost of much nicking of the skin, and the discomfort of shaving regularly, fine weather or foul.

'I think, Mrs Alleyne, that I know exactly what is the matter with your son.'

'Yes, yes,' said the lady, impatiently. 'Mr Oldroyd, you torture me.'

'Then, now I will relieve you, madam,' he said with a pleasant smile. 'He has really no physical complaint whatever.'

'I do not understand you,' she said coldly.

'I will be more plain then. He has no disease at all.'

'Mr Oldroyd!' said the lady in a disappointed tone, that to the young doctor's ears seemed to say as well: —'How foolish of me to call in this inexperienced

country practitioner, who, beyond a little general idea of his profession, knows next to nothing at all.'

'Oh, yes, my dear madam, you think he is very ill, and—pray excuse my plainness—in your motherly eyes he appears to be wasting away.'

Mrs Alleyne did not reply, but gazed at the speaker haughtily, and looked as cold and repellent as the room.

'Your son, I repeat, has no organic disease; he has a marvellously fine physique, great mental powers, and needs no doctor at all, unless it is to give him good advice.'

'I presumed, Mr Oldroyd, that it was the doctor's duty to give advice.'

'Exactly, my dear madam; but pray be patient with me if I talk to you a little differently from what you expected. You were prepared for me to look solemn, shake my head and say that the symptoms were rather serious, but not exactly grave; that we must hope for the best; that I was very glad you sent for me when you did; and that I would send in some medicine, and look in again to-morrow. Now, you said, "Be frank with me;" I say the same to you. Did you not expect something of this kind?'

'Well,' said Mrs Alleyne, with something that looked like—not the dawning of a smile, but the ghost of an old one, called up to flit for a moment about her lips, 'yes, I did expect something of the kind.'

'Exactly,' said Oldroyd, smiling genially, and as

if he enjoyed this verbal encounter. 'Now, kindly listen to me. As I say, your son has a fine physique, but what does he do with it? Does he take plenty of active out-door exercise?'

Mrs Alleyne shook her head.

'Does he partake of his meals regularly?'

'No, Mr Oldroyd,' said Mrs Alleyne, with a sigh.

'Does he sleep sufficiently and well?'

'Alas! No.'

'Of course he does not, my dear madam. Here is a man who never employs his muscles; never takes the slightest recreation; disappoints nature when she asks for food; and turns night into day as he performs long vigils watching the stars, and burning the midnight oil. How, in the name of all that is sensible, can such a man expect to enjoy good health? Why, nature revolts against it and steals it all away, to distribute among people who obey her laws.'

Mrs Alleyne sighed, and thought better of the doctor than she did before.

'It is impossible for such a man to be well, Mrs Alleyne; the wonder is that he has any health at all.'

'But he is really ill, now, Mr Oldroyd.'

'A little touched in the digestion, that is all.'

'And you will prescribe something for that?'

'Yes, ma'am, I'll prescribe turpentine.'

'Turpentine!' cried Mrs Alleyne, aghast.

'Yes, madam, out of nature's own pharmacopæia. Let him go and climb the hills every day, and inhale

it when the sun is on the fir woods. Let him get a horse and ride amongst the firs, or let him take a spade and dig the ground about this house, and turn it into a pleasant garden, surrounded by fir trees. That is all he wants.'

'Oh, doctor, is that all?' said Mrs Alleyne more warmly; and she laid her thin, white hand upon her visitor's arm.

'Well, not quite,' he said, with a smile. 'He is a great student; no one admires his work more than I, or the wonderful capacity of his mind, but he must be taken out of it a little—a man cannot always be studying the stars.'

'No, no; he does too much,' said Mrs Alleyne. 'You are quite right. But what would you recommend?'

'Nature again, madam. Something to give him an interest in this world, as well as in the other worlds he makes his study. In short, Mrs Alleyne, it would be the saving of your son if he fell in love.'

'Doctor!'

'And took to himself some sweet good girl as a wife.'

'Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!'

The doctor started, and looked for the source of the gush of mirth.

A sweet ringing silvery laugh, that sounded like bell music in the gloomy room, for Lucy Alleyne had entered unheard, to catch the doctor's last words, and burst into this girlish fit of merriment.

'Lucy!' exclaimed Mrs Alleyne with an angry glance, as she rose from her chair.

'Oh, I am so sorry, mamma. I beg your pardon, Mr Oldroyd, but it did seem so droll.'

She laughed again so merrily that it seemed infectious, and the young doctor would have joined in had not Mrs Alleyne been there; besides, as this was a professional call, he felt the necessity for some show of dignity.

'May I ask, Lucy, what is the meaning of this extremely unseemly mirth,' said Mrs Alleyne, with a good deal of annoyance in her tone.

'Don't be angry with me, mamma dear, but it did seem so comical; the idea of Moray falling in love and being married.'

'I fail to see the ridiculous side of the matter,' said Mrs Alleyne, 'especially at a time when Mr Oldroyd has been consulted by me upon the question of your brother's health.'

'Oh, but you don't think he is really ill, Mr Oldroyd, do you?' cried Lucy, anxiously.

'Indeed, I do not, Miss Alleyne. He requires nothing but plenty of open-air exercise, with more food and regular sleep.'

'And a wife,' said Lucy, with a mirthful look.

'And a wife,' said Oldroyd, gravely; and he gazed so intently at Lucy that her merry look passed away, and she coloured slightly, and glanced hastily at her mother.

'We must make Moray go out more, mamma dear,' she said hurriedly. 'I'll coax him to have walks with me, and I'll teach him botany; Major Day would be delighted if he'd come with him—I mean go with him; and—oh, I say, mamma, isn't dinner nearly ready? I am so hungry.'

'Lucy!' cried Mrs Alleyne, with a reproachful look, as Oldroyd rose.

'It is an enviable sensation, Miss Alleyne,' he said, as a diversion to the elder lady's annoyance; 'one of nature's greatest boons. As I was saying, Mrs Alleyne, *à propos* of your son, he neglects his health in his scientific pursuits, and the beautifully complicated machine of his system grows rusty. Why, the commonest piece of mechanism will not go well if it is not properly cared for, so how can we expect it of ourselves.'

'Quite true, Mr Oldroyd. Did you ride over? Is your horse waiting?'

'Oh, no, I walked. Lovely weather, Miss Alleyne. Good-day, madam, good-day.'

'But you have not taken any refreshment, Mr Oldroyd. Allow me to—'

'Why, dinner must be ready, mamma,' said Lucy. 'Will not Mr Oldroyd stop?'

'Of course, yes, I had forgotten,' said Mrs Alleyne, with a slight colour in her cheek, and a peculiar hesitancy in her voice. 'We—er—dine early—if you would join us, we should be very glad.'

'With great pleasure, madam,' said the young doctor, frankly; 'it will save me a five miles' walk, for I must go across the common this afternoon to Lindham.'

'To see poor old Mrs Wattley?' cried Lucy eagerly, as Mrs Alleyne tried to hide by a smile, her annoyance at her invitation being accepted.

'Yes; to see poor old Mrs Wattley,' said Oldroyd, nodding.

'Is she very ill?' said Lucy sympathetically.

'Stricken with a fatal disease, my dear young lady,' he replied.

'Oh!' ejaculated Lucy.

'One, however, that gives neither pain nor trouble. She will not suffer in the least.'

'I'm glad of that,' cried Lucy, 'for I like the poor old lady. What is her complaint?'

'Senility,' said Oldroyd, smiling. 'Why, my dear Miss Alleyne, she is ninety-five.'

'Will you come with me, Lucy,' said Mrs Alleyne, who had been vainly trying to catch her daughter's eye, and then—'perhaps Mr Oldroyd will excuse us.'

'Not if you are going to make any additions to the meal on my account, madam,' said the doctor, hastily. 'I am the plainest of plain men—a bachelor who lives on chops and steaks, and it needs a sharp-edged appetite to manage these country cuts.'

Mrs Alleyne smiled again, and the visitor was left alone.

'Old lady didn't like my staying,' he said to himself. 'Shouldn't have asked me, then. I am hungry, but— Oh! what a pretty, natural, clever little witch it is. I wish I'd a good practice; I should try my luck if I had, and I don't think there is any one in the way.'

'Humph! End of the world,' he said, rising and crossing to look at the picture. 'What a ghastly daub!'

'What a wilderness; why don't they have the garden done up?' he continued, going to one of the windows, and looking at the depressing, neglected place without. 'Ugh! what a home for such a bright little blossom. It must be something awful on a wet, wintry day.'

'Sorry I stopped,' he said, soon after.

'No, I'm not; I'm glad. Now, I'll be bound to say there's boiled mutton and turnips for dinner, and plain rice pudding. It's just the sort of meal one would expect in a house like this. Mum!'

He gave his lips a significant tap, for the door opened, and Lucy entered, accompanied by a sour-looking maid with a clayey skin and dull grey eyes, bearing a tray.

'Be as quick as you can, Eliza,' said Lucy. 'You won't mind my helping, Mr Oldroyd, will you?' she continued. 'We only keep one servant now.'

'Mind? Not I,' he replied cheerily. 'Let me help too. I'll lay the knives and forks.'

'No, no, no!' cried Lucy, as she wondered what Mrs Alleyne would have said if she had heard her allusion to 'one servant now.'

'Oh, but I shall,' he said; and the maid looked less grim as she saw the doctor begin to help. 'Let's see,' he said, 'knives right, forks left. Won't do to turn the table round if you place them wrong, as the Irishman did.'

Just then the maid—Eliza—left the room to fetch some addition to the table.

'I am glad you are going to stay, Mr Oldroyd,' said Lucy naïvely.

'Are you?' he said, watching her intently as the busy little hands produced cruets and glasses from the sideboard cupboard.

'Oh yes, for it is so dull here.'

'Do you find it so?'

'Oh, no, I don't. I was thinking of Moray. It will be someone for him to talk to. Mamma fidgets about him so; but I felt as sure as could be that he only looked ill because he works so terribly hard.'

A step was heard outside, and the young doctor started from the table, where he was arranging a couple of spoons on either side of a salt-cellar, with so guilty a look that Lucy turned away her head to conceal a smile.

Oldroyd saw it though, and was annoyed at being so weak and boyish; but he felt that, after all, he

was right, for it would have looked extremely undignified in Mrs Alleyne's eyes if he had been caught playing so domestic a part in a strange house.

'I wish she had not laughed at me, though,' he said to himself; and then he tried to pass the matter off as Mrs Alleyne came back, bland and dignified, trying to conceal the fact that she had been out to make a few preparations that would help to hide the poverty of the land.

'You will excuse our meal being very simple, Mr Oldroyd,' she said quietly; 'I did not expect company.'

'If you would kindly treat me as if I were not company, Mrs Alleyne, I should be greatly obliged,' replied Oldroyd; and then there was an interchange of bows—that on the lady's part being of a very dignified but gracious kind, one that suggested tolerance, and an absolute refusal to accept the doctor as anything else than a visitor.

Oldroyd felt rather uncomfortable, but there was comfort in Lucy's presence, as, utterly wanting in her mother's reserve, she busied herself in trying to make everything pleasant and attractive for their guest, in so natural and homely a manner, that while the doctor had felt one moment that he wished he had not stayed, the next he was quite reconciled to his fate.

'I feel as sure as can be that I am right,' thought Oldroyd, as at the end of a few minutes, Eliza entered with a large dish, whose contents were

hidden by a battered and blackened cover, placed it upon the table, retreated, came back with a couple of vegetable dishes, retreated once more and came back with four dinner-plates, whose edges were chipped and stained from long usage.

Oldroyd glanced at Lucy, and saw her pretty forehead wrinkled up, reading accurately enough that she was troubled at the shabbiness of the table's furnishings; and, as if she felt that he was gazing at her, she looked up quickly, caught his eye, and coloured with vexation, feeling certain as she did that he had read her thoughts.

'Will you excuse me a moment, Mr Oldroyd?' said Mrs Alleyne, with dignity. 'We do not use a dinner-bell, the noise disturbs my son. I always fetch him from the observatory myself.'

Oldroyd bowed again, and crossed the room to open the door for his hostess to pass out.

'What a nuisance all this formality is,' he thought to himself, 'I hate it;' but all the same, he felt constrained to follow Mrs Alleyne's lead, and he was beginning once more to regret his stay when he turned to encounter the fresh, natural, girlish look of the daughter of the house.

'Mamma makes a regular habit of fetching my brother to meals, Mr Oldroyd,' said Lucy; 'I don't believe he would come unless she went. But while she is away, do tell me once again you don't think Moray is going to be seriously ill?'

'But I do think so,' he replied.

'Oh, Mr Oldroyd!'

The young doctor gazed at the pretty sympathetic face with no little pleasure, as he saw its troubled look, and the tears rising in the eyes.

'How nice,' he thought, 'to be anyone she cares for like this,' and then he hugged himself upon his knowledge, which in this case was power—the power of being able to change that troubled face to one full of smiles.

'I think he is going to be very seriously ill—if he does not alter his way of life.'

'He could avoid the illness, then?' cried Lucy, with the change coming.

'Certainly he could. He has only to take proper rest and out-door exercise to be as well as you are.'

'Then pray advise him, Mr Oldroyd,' said Lucy, who was beaming now. 'Do try and get him to be sensible. It is of no use to send him medicine—he would not take a drop. Hush! here he is.'

At that moment there were slow, deliberate steps in the hall, and then the door opened, and Mrs Alleyne, with a smile full of pride upon her calm, stern face, entered, leaning upon the arm of a tall, grave, thoughtful-looking man, whose large dark-grey eyes seemed to be gazing straight before him, through everything, into the depths of space, while his mind was busy with that which he sought to see.

He was apparently about three or four-and-thirty,

well-built and muscular; but his muscles looked soft and rounded. There was an appearance of relaxation, even in his walk; and, though his eyes were wide open, he gave one the idea of being in a dream. He was dressed in a loose, easy-fitting suit of tweeds, but they had been put on anyhow, and the natural curls of his dark-brown hair and beard made it very evident that the time he spent at the toilet-table was short.

What struck the visitor most was the veneration given to the student by his mother and sister, the former full of pride in her offspring, as she drew back his chair, and waited until he had seated himself, before she took her own place at the head of the table, and signed to her guest to follow her example.

It was a reversal of the ordinary arrangements at a board, for Oldroyd found himself opposite Moray Alleyne, with Mrs Alleyne and her daughter at the head and foot. In fact, it soon became evident that Mrs Alleyne's son took no interest whatever in matters terrestrial of a domestic nature, his mind being generally far away.

Mrs Alleyne had announced to him, as they came towards the dining-room, that Mr Oldroyd would join them at the meal; but the scrap of social information was covered by a film of nebular theory, till the astronomer took his place at the table, when he seemed to start out of a fit of celestial dreaming, and to come back to earth.

'Ah, Mr Oldroyd,' he said, with his face lighting up and becoming quite transformed. 'I had forgotten that you were to join us. Pray forgive my rudeness. I get so lost in my calculations.'

'Don't mention it,' said Oldroyd, nodding; and then he looked hard at his *vis-à-vis*, marvelling at the change, and the tones of his deep mellow voice, and thinking what a man this would be if he had become statesman, orator, or the like, concluding by saying mentally, 'What a physique for a West End physician! Why, that presence—a little more grey, and that soft, winning, confidential voice, would be a fortune to him. But he would have to dress.'

'I am sorry we have only plain boiled mutton to offer you, Mr Oldroyd,' said Mrs Alleyne, as the covers were removed.

'I knew it was,' thought Oldroyd, glancing at the livid, steaming leg of mutton. Then aloud: 'One of the joints I most appreciate, madam—with its appropriate trimmings, Miss Alleyne,' he added smiling at Lucy.

'I'm afraid the potatoes are not good,' said Lucy, colouring with vexation; 'and the turnips seem very hard and stringy.'

'Don't prejudge them, my dear,' said Mrs Alleyne with dignity. 'We have great difficulty in getting good vegetables, Mr Oldroyd,' she continued, 'though we are in the country. We—er—we do not keep a gardener.'

'And the cottage people don't care to sell,' said Oldroyd. 'I have found that out. But you have a large garden here, Mrs Alleyne.'

'Yes,' said the lady, coldly.

'Ah,' said Oldroyd, looking across at Moray Alleyne. 'Now, there's your opportunity. Why not take to gardening?'

'Take to gardening?' said Alleyne, shaking off the dreamy air that had come upon him as he mechanically ate what his mother had carefully placed upon his plate, that lady selecting everything, and her son taking it without question, as a furnace fire might swallow so much coal.

'Yes; take to gardening, my good sir,' said Oldroyd. 'It is a very ancient occupation, and amply rewards its votaries.'

'I am well rewarded by much higher studies,' said Alleyne, smiling; and Oldroyd was more than ever impressed by his voice and manner.

'Exactly, but you must have change.'

Alleyne shook his head.

'I do not feel the want of change,' he said.

'But your body does,' replied Oldroyd, 'and it is crying out in revolt against the burden your mind is putting upon it.'

'Why, doctor,' said Alleyne, with his face lighting up more and more, 'I thought you had stayed to dinner. This is quite a professional visit.'

'My dear sir, pray don't call it so,' said Oldroyd.

'I only want to give you good advice. I want you to give me better vegetables than these—from your own garden,' he added, merrily, as he turned to Lucy, who was eagerly watching her brother's face.

'Thank you, doctor,' replied Alleyne shaking his head; 'but I have no time.'

Oldroyd hesitated for a moment or two, as he went on with his repast of very badly cooked, exceedingly tough mutton; but a glance at his hostess and Lucy showed him that his words found favour with them, and he persevered in a pleasant, half-bantering strain that had, however, a solid basis of sound shrewd sense beneath its playful tone.

'Hark at him!' he said. 'Has not time! Now, look here, my dear Mr Alleyne—pray excuse my familiarity, for though we have been neighbours these past five years, we have not been intimate—I say, look here, my dear sir — potatoes! Thank you, Miss Alleyne. That one will do. I like them waxey. Now look here, my dear sir, you are an astronomer.'

'Only a very humble student of a great science, Mr Oldroyd,' said the other, meekly.

'Ah, well, we will not discuss that. At all events you are a mathematician, and deal in algebraic quantities, and differential calculus, and logarithims, and all that sort of thing.'

'Yes—yes,' said Alleyne, going on eating in his mechanical way as if he diligently took to heart the

epigrammatic teaching of the old philosopher—'Live not to eat, but eat to live.'

'Well then, my dear sir, I'll give you a calculation to make.'

'Not now, doctor, pray,' said Mrs Alleyne, quickly. 'My son's digestion is very weak.'

'This won't hurt his digestion, madam,' said Oldroyd; 'a child could do it without a slate.'

'Pray ask me,' said Alleyne, 'and I will endeavour to answer you.'

'Well, then: here is my problem,' said Oldroyd; 'perhaps you will try and solve it too, Miss Alleyne. Suppose two men set to work to perform a task, and the one—as you mathematicians would put it, say A, worked twenty hours a day for five years, while B worked eight hours a day for twenty years, which would do most work?'

'I know,' said Lucy, quickly; 'the busy B, for he would do a hundred and sixty hours' work, while A would only do a hundred hours' work.'

Alleyne smiled and nodded very tenderly at his sister.

'Isn't that right?' she said quickly, and her cheeks flushed.

'Quite right as to proportion, Lucy,' he said, 'but in each case it would be three hundred and sixty-five times, or three hundred and thirteen times as much.'

'Of course,' she said. 'How foolish of me.'

'Well, Mr Oldroyd, what about your problem?'

continued Alleyne, commencing upon a fresh piece of tough mutton.

'You have solved it,' said Oldroyd. 'You have shown me that the eight-hour's man does more work than the twenty-hour's man.'

'Yes, but one works five years, the other twenty, according to your arrangement.'

'Not my arrangement, sir, Nature's. The man who worked twenty hours per diem would be worn out mentally at the end of five years. The man who worked eight hours a day, all surroundings being reasonable, would, at the end of twenty years, be in a condition to go on working well for another ten, perhaps twenty years. Now, my dear sir, do you see my drift?'

Moray Alleyne laid down his knife and fork, placed his elbows on either side of his plate, clasped his hands together, and then seemed to cover them with his thick, dark beard, as he rested his chin.

A dead silence fell upon the little party, and, as if it were some chemical process going on, small round discs of congealed fat formed on the mutton gravy in the dish.

Mrs Alleyne was about to break the silence, but she saw that her son was ready to answer, and she refrained, sitting very upright and motionless in her chair, as she watched the furrows coming and going on his brow.

'That is bringing it home, doctor,' he said, and

there was a slight huskiness in his voice as he spoke. 'But you are exaggerating.'

'I protest, no,' said Oldroyd, eagerly. 'Allow me, I have made some study of animal physiology, and I have learned this: Nature strengthens the muscles, nerves and tissues, if they are well used, up to a certain point. If that mark is passed—in other words, if you trespass on the other side—punishment comes, the deterioration is rapid and sure.'

'Mother,' said Alleyne, turning to her affectionately, 'you have been setting the doctor to tell me this.'

'Indeed, no, my dear,' she cried, 'I was not aware what course our conversation would take; but, believe me, Moray, I am glad, for this must be true.'

'True?' cried Oldroyd. 'My dear madam, the world teems with proofs.'

'Yes,' said Alleyne thoughtfully: and there was a far-off, dreamy look in his eyes as he gazed straight before him as if into space, 'it is true—it must be true; but with so much to learn—such vast discoveries to make—who can pause?'

'The man who wishes to win in the long race,' said Oldroyd smiling, and again there was a minute's absolute silence, during which the young doctor caught a reconnaissant look from Lucy.

Then Alleyne spoke again.

'Yes, Mr Oldroyd, you are right,' he said. 'Nature is a hard mistress.'

'What, for not breaking her laws?' cried Oldroyd.

Come, come, Mr Alleyne, my knowledge of astronomy extends to the Great Bear, Perseus, Cassiopeia, and a few more constellations; but where would your science be if her laws were not immutable?'

For answer, to the surprise of all, Moray Alleyne slowly unclasped his hands, and stretched one across to the young doctor.

'Thank you,' he said. 'You are quite right. I give way, for I am beaten. Mother, dear, I yield unwillingly, but Nature's laws are immutable, and I'll try to obey them. Are you content?'

'My boy!'

Stern, unbending Mrs Alleyne was for the moment carried away by her emotion, and forgetting the doctor's presence, she left her chair to throw her arms round her son's neck, bend down, kiss his forehead, and then hurry from the room.

'She loves me, Mr Oldroyd,' said Alleyne simply. 'Lucy dear, bring mamma back. We are behaving very badly to our guest.'

Lucy had already left her chair, and she, too, impulsively kissed her brother and then ran from the room to hide her tears.

'Poor things,' said Alleyne, smiling. 'I behave very badly to them, doctor, and worry them to death; but I am so lost in my studies that I neglect everything. They have made such sacrifices for me, and I forget it. I don't see them—I don't notice what they do. It was to humour me that they came to live in this

desolate spot, and my poor mother has impoverished herself to meet the outlay for my costly instruments. It is too bad, but I am lost in my work, and nothing will ever take me from it now.'

'Nothing?' said Oldroyd.

'Nothing,' was the reply, given in all simple child-like earnestness, as the young doctor gazed straight into the deep full eyes that did not for a moment blanch. 'So you will not give me pills and draughts, doctor,' said Alleyne at last, smiling.

'Medicine? No. Take exercise, man. Go more into society. See friends. Take walks. Garden. Make this desert bloom with roses.'

'Yes—yes—yes,' said Alleyne, thoughtfully. 'I must try. Mr Oldroyd,' he said suddenly, 'I should like to see more of you—if—if you would allow me.'

'My dear sir, nothing would give me greater pleasure. Here, I'll come and garden with you, if you like.'

'I should be very grateful,' said Alleyne. 'Give me your advice,' he continued, earnestly, 'for I—I must live—I have so much to do—endless labour—and if I do not husband my strength, I—you are right: a man must take exercise and sleep. Mr Oldroyd, I shall take your advice, and— Hush, here they come.'

In effect, looking red-eyed, but perfectly calm now, Mrs Alleyne entered with Lucy, and the rest of the dinner passed off most pleasantly to Oldroyd, who was

ready to accord that the poor, badly-cooked mutton was the most delicious he had ever eaten, and the vegetables as choice as could have been grown. Doubtless this was due to Lucy's grateful glances, and the quiet, grave condescension with which Mrs Alleyne turned from her idol to say a few words now and then.

Even Alleyne himself seemed to be making efforts to drag himself back from the company of the twin orbs in space, or the star-dust of the milky way, to chat about the ordinary things of every-day life; and at last, it was with quite a guilty sensation of having overstepped the bounds of hospitality in his stay that Oldroyd rose to go.

'You will call and see us again soon, Mr Oldroyd?' said Mrs Alleyne, with the dignity of a reigning queen.

'Professionally, madam,' he said, 'there is no need. I have exhausted my advice at this first visit. It is for you to play the nurse, and see that my suggestions are carried out.'

'Then as a friend,' said the lady, extending her thin white hand. 'I am sure my son feels grateful to you, and will be glad to see you at any time.'

She glanced at Alleyne, who was seated in the sunshine, holding a pair of smoked glass spectacles to his eyes, and gazing up at the dazzling orb passing onwards towards the west.

'I thank you heartily,' said Oldroyd. 'Society is

not so extensive here that one can afford to slight so kind an invitation.'

'Mr Oldroyd going?' said Alleyne, starting, as, in obedience to a look from her mother, Lucy bent over him, and, pressing the glasses down with one hand, whispered a few words in his ear.

'Yes, I must be off now,' said the young doctor.

'You will come and see us again soon?' said Alleyne. 'Would you care to see my observatory? It might interest you a little.'

'I shall be glad,' said Oldroyd, 'very glad—some day,' and after a most friendly good-bye, he took his soft hat and stout stick, and, leaving the cheerless, sombre house, went down the steep slope, and took a short cut across the rough boggy land towards his patient's cottage.

'Thorough lady, but she is very stiff; and she worships her son. Charming little girl that. Nice and natural. No modern young-ladyism in her,' he muttered, as he picked his way. 'I should think it would be possible to be in her company a whole day without a single allusion to frilling, or square-cut, or trains, or the colour and shape of Miss Blank's last new bonnet. Quite a sensible little girl. Pretty flower growing in very uncongenial soil, but she seems happy enough.'

Philip Oldroyd's communings were checked by some very boggy patches, which had to be leaped and skirted, and otherwise avoided; but as soon as he was

once more upon firm ground, he resumed where he had left off.

'Wonderfully fond of her brother, too. Well, I don't wonder. He's a fine fellow after all. I thought him a dullard—a book-worm; but he's something more than that. Why, when he wakes up out of his dreamy state, he's a noble-looking fellow. What a model he would make for an artist who wanted to paint a Roman senator. Why doesn't nature give us all those fine massive heads, with crisp hair and beard? Humph! lost in his far-seeing studies, and nothing will draw him out of them for more than a few hours. Nothing would ever draw him away but one thing. One thing? No, not it, though. He's not the sort of man. He's good-looking enough, and he has a voice that, if bent to woo, would play mischief with a woman's heart. He'll never take that complaint, though, I'll vow. It would be all on the lady's side. And yet, I don't know: man is mortal after all. I am for one. Very mortal indeed, and if I go often to The Firs, I shall be mixing Lucy Alleyne up with my prescriptions, and that won't do at all.'

CHAPTER VII.

PLANETS IN OPPOSITION.

JUDITH HAYLE was busy 'tidying up' the keeper's cottage, which looked brighter since her return home, for there were flowers in glasses set here and there, and she was mentally wishing that father would clean the captain's double gun out in the wash-house instead of bringing a pail of water into the living-room, to plant between his knees as he worked the rod up and down the barrels.

The girl looked serious, for her sudden return had made her father stern, and she expected to be called upon for more explanation, and a cross-examination, which did not begin.

'Who's this?' said the keeper, with a quick look through the little lattice. 'The missus. Here, Judy, she hasn't come here for nothing. Go upstairs and let me see her first.'

The girl looked startled and hurriedly obeyed, while her father hastily wiped his hands and opened the door.

Mrs Rolph was close up, and he went out into the porch to meet her, drawing aside quietly and gravely to let her pass.

'Will you walk in, ma'am?'

'Yes, Hayle, thank you,' said Mrs Rolph, speaking in a distant, dignified way, as of a mistress about to rebuke an erring servant.

She passed him, looking quickly round the room in search of Judith, and then, turning her eyes inquiringly upon the keeper, who drew a chair forward, and then stood back respectfully as Mrs Rolph sat down.

'Do you know why I have come here, Hayle?' she said, striving to speak as one who feels herself aggrieved.

'Yes, ma'am. 'Bout sending Judith home.'

'Your child has spoken to you?'

'No, ma'am.'

Mrs Rolph coughed faintly, to gain time. The task did not seem so easy in presence of this sturdy, independent-looking Englishman, and she regretted the tone she had taken, and her next remark as soon as it was spoken.

'Well, Hayle,' she continued, 'what have you to say to this?'

'Nay, ma'am,' said the keeper coldly; 'it's what have you to say?'

Mrs Rolph wanted to speak quietly, and make a kind of appeal to the keeper, but the words would not come as she wished, and she turned upon him, in her disappointment and anger, with the first that rose to her lips.

'To say? That all this is disgraceful. I am bitterly hurt and grieved to find that you, an old servant of my husband, the man whom he rescued

from disgrace, should, in return for the kindness of years and years, give me cause to speak as I am compelled to do now.'

'Indeed, ma'am!'

'Yes. Out of kindness to your poor dead wife, I took Judith, and clothed and educated her, treated her quite as if she had been of my own family, made her the companion of my niece; in short, spared nothing; and my reward is this: that she has set snares for my son, and caused an amount of unhappiness in my house that it may take years to get over, and which may never be forgotten. Now, then, what excuse have you to offer? What has your child to say?'

The keeper looked at her and smiled.

'Nay, ma'am,' he said quietly, 'you don't mean all this, and you would not speak so if you were not put out. You know that I've got a case against you. I trusted my poor lass in your hands.'

'Trusted, man?'

'Yes, ma'am, that's the word—trusted her. You promised to be like a mother to her.'

'And I have been till she proved ungrateful.'

'Nay, she has not been ungrateful, ma'am, and you know it. It's for me to ask you what you were doing to let your son put such ideas in my poor child's head.'

'Hayle!'

'Yes, ma'am, I must speak my mind.'

'It is madness. You know it is madness.'

'Yes, ma'am, if you call it so; but that's how we stand, and my poor girl is not to blame. It is you.'

'How dare you!'

'Because I am her father, ma'am, and my child is as much to me as your son is to you.'

'This is insolence, sir. Have the goodness to remember who I am.'

'I never forget it, ma'am. You are my missus, the old master's wife. But this is not a matter of mistress and servant, but of a mother and a father disputing about their children.'

Mrs Rolph drew herself up, and her eyes flashed, but the fire was drowned out directly by the tears of trouble and vexation, and the woman prevailed over the mistress directly after, as she said, in quite an altered tone,—

'Hayle, my good man, what is to be done?'

'Hah!' ejaculated the keeper; 'now, ma'am, you are talking like a sensible woman, and we may be able to do business.'

'Yes, yes, Hayle, I was angry. I could not help it. All this comes nigh to breaking my heart. It is, of course, quite impossible. What do you propose to do?'

'Forget it, ma'am, if I can.'

'And Judith?'

'Hah! That's another thing, ma'am.'

'But she surely is not so vain as to—to—'

'My Judith is a woman, ma'am. Is that vanity?'

'Yes, of course. No, no, Hayle. But, once more: it is impossible.'

'Yes, ma'am.'

'Ah, that's very good and sensible of you. Now, look here. I have thought it all over as I came, and I am sorry to say what I have decided upon seems to be the best plan. It will grieve me terribly, but there's no help for it. You and Judith must go away. You will agree to this, Hayle?'

'You mean, ma'am, that we old people are to settle the matter as to what is best for the young folks?'

'Yes, yes, that is right.'

'And what will the young folks say?'

Mrs Rolph hesitated for a moment or two.

'We cannot stop to consult them, my good man, when we are working for their good. Now, look here, Hayle; of course it will put you to a good deal of inconvenience, for which I am sorry, and to meet that difficulty I went back to my room and wrote this.' She took a cheque from her little reticule. 'It is for fifty pounds, Hayle; it will cover all your expenses till you obtain another appointment. Why, Benjamin Hayle, how long have you been in our service?'

'A many years, ma'am,' said the keeper gravely; and then he read the cheque over as Mrs Rolph placed it in his hands. 'Ah! "Pay to Benjamin Hayle or bearer, fifty pounds.—Constantia Rolph." A good deal of money, ma'am. And now, I think I'll call Judith down.'

'Yes—yes, do. I must say a few words to her. Poor girl, I wish her well.'

'Thank you, ma'am,' said the keeper quietly.

'Yes: it is not all her fault.'

'Judith—Judith, my girl,' said the keeper, opening the door at the foot of the stairs. 'Come down.'

There was the quick rustling of a dress, and Judith came down, red-eyed, pale and wild-looking, to lay her hand on her father's arm.

'Ah, Judith, my dear,' began Mrs Rolph, hastily. 'Your father and I have been discussing this unhappy affair, and, sorry as we are, we feel obliged to come to the conclusion—the same conclusion that you will, as a good, sensible girl, when you have well thought it out—that this silly flirtation cannot go on. It is for your sake as well as my son's that I speak.'

Hayle felt his child's hand tremble on his arm.

'You are too wise and too good to wish to injure my son's prospects for life, and so we have decided that it will be better for your father to leave the place, and take you right away, where all this little trouble will soon be forgotten.'

'And,' interposed the keeper, 'the missus has given me this, my dear—a cheque for fifty pounds, to pay all our expenses. What shall I do with it, my dear?'

'Burn it, father,' said Judith, slowly. 'It is to buy us off.'

'Hah!' said the keeper, with a smile full of satisfaction 'that's well said;' and he placed the end of

the cheque to the glowing ashes. It burst into flame and he held it till it was nearly burned away, tossing the scrap he had held into the fire.

'Hayle, you must be mad!' cried Mrs Rolph, astonishment having at first closed her lips.

'Nay, ma'am, we're not mad, either of us,' said the keeper, gravely. 'There are some things money can buy, and some things it can't, ma'am. What you want is one of the things it can't buy. Judith and I are going away from the cottage—right away, ma'am. I'm only a keeper, but there's a bit of independence in me; and as for my girl here, whom you made a lady, she's going to act like what you have made her. She owns to me, in her looks if not in words, that she loves young master, and she's too proud to come to you and be his wife, till you come to her, and beg her to. Am I right, Judith?'

The girl gave him a quick look, and then drew herself up, and clung to him.

'Yes, father,' she said, in a whisper which caused her intense suffering 'you are right.'

'There, ma'am, are you satisfied?'

'No,' said Mrs Rolph, in a husky voice, 'I am not satisfied, but it cannot be. My son's welfare is at stake.'

She rose, and tried to speak again, but unable to utter another word, she left the cottage, father and daughter watching her till she disappeared among the dark aisles of the firs.

CHAPTER VIII.

MARS IN THE ASCENDANT.

'BETTER get it over,' said Captain Rolph, the next day, as he indulged himself in what he called a short 'spin' down the lane by the side of The Warren, and in the direction of the Alleynes' home, which stood up, grim and bleak, out of the sandy desert land. 'What with the old man, and the major, and the mater, and Madge, and—oh, hang it all! I'm not going to stand any humbug from Judy, and so I tell her. There, I'll go and get it over at once.'

He stopped running, braced himself up, and marched in regular military fashion, back to The Warren, to see Marjorie seated at one of the front windows, ready to give him a smile in response to his short nod.

The next moment he stopped short, gazing sharply down the avenue at the broad, bent back of the keeper, who, with head down, was striding away toward the gate.

'What's he been here for?—to see me?'

Rolph entered the house, walked noisily into his study—a gun-room, for the study of fowling-pieces

and fishing rods, with a museum-like collection of prize cups and belts dotted about, in company with trophies of the chase, heads, horns and skins. Here he rang the bell, which was very promptly answered by the butler, Captain Rolph being a follower of the celebrated Count Shucksen, and using so much military drill-sergeant powder with his orders that they went home at once.

'Hayle been to see me, Smith?' he asked, sharply.

'No, sir. Came to bring up your guns after my mistress had been down to the keeper's lodge this morning.'

'Brought up my guns,' said Rolph, wonderingly. 'What for?'

The man looked at him rather curiously in silence.

'Well, idiot, why don't you speak?'

'Not my business, sir. In trouble, I suppose. Benjamin Hayle and me has never been friends, and so he said nothing, on'y one word as he went out.'

'And what was that?'

'Sack, sir—sack!'

'That'll do.'

'Yes, sir—I knew it would come some day,' said the butler to himself. 'Sticking up a notorious poacher on a level with respectable servants, and putting his daughter over 'em, making my lady of her. But pride always did have a fall.'

'Humph!' muttered Rolph, with a laugh, 'the old

girl strikes first blow without knowing what was coming. All right. Now for it. Just as well, perhaps. But he was a good keeper.'

He went out into the hall just in time to meet Marjorie, who was tripping blithely down the stairs, singing the while.

'What a lovely day it is, Rob,' she said.

'Is it?' he said grimly.

'Isn't it, dear? Why, what's the matter? Are you going in to see auntie on business?'

'Yes, on that business. Did you and my mother hatch up that dodge between you?'

'I don't know what you mean, Rob.'

'Of course not, my clever little schemer. Come in, too, and hear how I've flanked you both.'

A sudden change came over the girl's smiling countenance, with its air of wonder, and it was with a vindictive flash of her eyes that she suddenly caught Rolph by the arm.

'Not married?' she said in a harsh whisper.

'No; not yet.'

'Hah!'

It was a catching sigh of relief as Rolph threw open the drawing-room door, and, with mock politeness, stood aside for Marjorie to enter.

Mrs Rolph looked troubled and disturbed, and evidently welcomed the appearance of Marjorie, making a sign for the girl to come to her side, and then drawing herself up in her most stately way ready to

receive her son's attack, which was not long in coming.

'Why did you go to Hayle's this morning?'

'On business, Rob.'

'What for?'

'To tell him that the time had come when I required his services no longer, and that he must go at once.'

'What! My keeper?'

'Mine, Robert,' said Mrs Rolph, firmly. 'You forget the terms of your father's will. You have your income; I have mine, with undisturbed possession of everything at The Warren while I live. You occupy the position of my guest when you are here.'

'Humph! all right. And so you have discharged Ben, eh? When does he go?'

'To-day.'

'Sharp practice, mother; and all because poor Judy is pretty.'

'And all because, as I told him, I wished to save—I will speak plainly, even in your cousin's presence—a weak, vain girl from disgrace.'

'Humph! pretty plain speaking that, mother.'

'There are times when plain speaking is necessary, my son, and when strong action is required to save you from the consequences of a mad passion.'

'Rubbish!'

'What! Don't you know Ben Hayle better than that? Do you think he is the man to sit down

quietly when he knows the truth? Have you not seen that the foolish fellow believes thoroughly what he as good as told me to my face this morning—that he expects to see his daughter some day mistress here?'

'Ben Hayle's a fool,' cried Rolph, angrily, 'and you and Madge here are half-crazy. Let's have an end of it. Once for all, mother, I mean to do exactly as I like, and I have done as I liked.'

Mrs Rolph started forward in her chair, and Marjorie's lips tightened.

'What do you mean, Rob?' cried the former.

'You want to see me married, I believe?'

'I want to see you prove yourself an honourable gentleman—a worthy son of your father, not a man for whom I should blush.'

'All right, then. I've taken the right steps for settling into a quiet, country gentleman. I'm going to be married.'

Marjorie's eyes flashed.

'Rob, you will not be so mad as to marry that girl?'

'Yes, I shall,' he said coolly.

'Then I have done with you for ever. Judith Hayle may come here when I am in my grave, but till then—'

'Let the churchyard alone, mother. Do you think I'm such a fool as to marry a poacher's daughter?'

'Rob! Then you have repented!' cried Mrs Rolph excitedly, and Marjorie trembled and sank upon her knees to cling to her aunt's waist.

'Oh, yes, I've repented, and I'm going to be a very good boy and get married soon.'

'Madge, my dear child!' cried Mrs Rolph, embracing the girl at her feet.

'There, don't get filling her head full of false hopes, the same as you did Judy Hayle's mother,' said Rolph brutally. 'I went yesterday and proposed, and have been accepted.'

Marjorie's breath came and went in a low hiss as she turned her wild eyes upon her cousin.

'Proposed? To whom? Rob, not to that pert, penniless girl at The Firs?'

'What, the moon-shooter's sister!' cried Rolph. 'Hah! nice, little, bright-eyed thing. But no: try again.'

Mrs Rolph rose excitedly from her chair, and Marjorie's hands dropped from her waist as she crouched lower upon the carpet.

'Not John Day's daughter—Glynne?'

'Good guess, mother. Glynne Day is to be my wife by-and-by. The old man is agreeable and the major isn't. So now, the sooner you go and call upon them and make it all right the better.'

Poor Marjorie dropped out of Mrs Rolph's sight.

'Rob! my dear boy!' she cried as she flung her arms about her son's neck to kiss him fondly, while

Marjorie rose slowly, looking white even to her lips, and with a peculiar smile dawning upon them as her eyes flashed upon the group before her.

'I knew I could trust you, Rob,' cried Mrs Rolph; and then, recollecting herself, 'Madge, my poor child, I am very sorry, but, you see, it was not to be.'

'No, auntie dear,' said the girl, with the smile growing more marked; 'marriages are made in Heaven, you know. I shall not mind—much. Of course the great aim of all our lives was to see dear Rob happy. Glynne Day is very beautiful and sweet, and a daughter of whom you will be quite proud. I should be deceitful if I did not own to being grievously disappointed, but, as was natural, Rob's love for me has only been that of a brother for a sister'— she fixed Rolph's eyes as she spoke, and his turned shiftily away—'and if I have been a little silly, the pain will soon wear off. Glynne Day. How nice. I'm sure I shall love her very much, though she is rather cold. Isn't she, Rob?'

'That is very nice of you, Madge, my dear,' said Mrs Rolph, embracing her niece. 'And who knows how soon another prince may come, my dear.'

'Oh, aunt!'

'And you will try to forget all this?'

'Of course, aunt, dear. It was fate,' said the girl innocently.

'And—and you will not mind going over to Brackley with me to call?'

'I, mind? Oh, auntie, I should be horribly disappointed if you did not take me. There, Rob,' she continued, with a little sigh, 'that's all over, and I congratulate you—brother; and I shall kiss dearest Glynne as I kiss you now.'

'Humph! thought she was going to bite me,' muttered Rolph. Then aloud, 'Well, Madge, it was a bit of a flirtation, I own. Now, then, as you've behaved like a trump, so will I. What shall it be—a pearl locket, or diamonds, or a bracelet?'

'Oh, how good and generous you are, Rob dear. How nice of you!' cried Marjorie in gushing tones. 'I have so often longed for a sapphire bracelet.'

'Then you shall have one,' said Rolph, but not quite so warmly as he had spoken before. 'I'm off now.'

'Won't you stay to lunch, dear? said Mrs Rolph.

'No. I shall have a sandwich in my room. I'm training. I say! can you go over this afternoon?'

'Of course we will, dear,' said Mrs Rolph, warmly; and there was a look of relief in her eyes.

'Then that's all settled,' said Rolph; and he left the room, not noticing the hard look in his cousin's eyes. 'Sorry about poor old Ben Hayle,' he muttered as he went to his own room. 'But perhaps it's best. Going to be married, and must be a good boy now.'

Then a thought struck him, and he hurried back to the drawing-room, to surprise Marjorie upon her knees, with her face buried in Mrs Rolph's lap.

'Oh, beg pardon,' he said, hastily; 'but look here, mother; don't be quite so hard on Ben Hayle. I mean as to a day or two.'

'Leave that to me, Rob—please,' said Mrs Rolph.

'Oh, all right,' he cried, and he went right off this time. 'Poor little Madge! but she won't be long before she hooks another fish. Bet a sov. she tries it on with the astronomer; but I must go and smooth it down a bit at the lodge. What a blessing it is to have nearly enough coin. That bracelet did wonders; but Judy mustn't play quite so high, and, as for Ben —well he's my mother's man, and—I know; I'll let him keep that old gun.'

CHAPTER IX.

ATTRACTION AND REPULSION.

ROLPH dined at Brackley that evening, and found Sir John in the best of spirits. Glynne was bright and eager to show him the progress she had made with her painting, at the sight of which he started as they stood together in the drawing-room.

'But I say, Glynne, you know, this is doosid clever and ought to go to the Academy; only, hang it all! you mustn't get painting fellows like that.'

'Why not?'

'Because—because—well, you see the fellow's a regular scamp—dangerous sort of a character, you know—been in prison for poaching, and that sort of thing.'

'But he's such a patient model.'

'Model, eh? Not my idea of a model. Look here, if you want some one to sit, you shall have me.'

The conversation changed to the visit she had received that afternoon; and Glynne in her new excitement was rapturous about 'dear Mrs Rolph,' but rather lukewarm about her niece, and Rolph noticed it.

'Madge nice to you?' he said.

'Your cousin? Oh, yes,' replied Glynne, thoughtfully. 'She seemed rather shy and strange at first, but soon got over that. We have always been a little distant, for I think I was too quiet for her; but of course we shall be like sisters now.

'H'm, yes, I suppose so. But Madge is rather a strange girl.'

The dinner passed off pretty well. Rolph drinking a good deal of the baronet's favourite claret, and every now and then finding the major's eyes fixed upon him in rather a searching way which he did not like; but on the whole, Major Day was pleasant and gentlemanly, and rather given to sigh on seeing how happy and bright his niece looked. When at last she rose during dessert, and Rolph opened the door for her to pass out to the drawing-room, he was obliged to own that they would make a handsome couple, and on seeing his brother's inquiring glance, he nodded back to him, making Sir John look pleased.

'I've no right to object if they are satisfied,' he said to himself; 'but he is not the fellow I should have chosen.'

All the same, he shook hands warmly enough when Rolph left that night.

'Jack,' he said, as he sat with his brother over their last cigar, 'I think I may as well get married now.'

'You think what!' cried Sir John dropping his cigar.

'I think I shall get married. I mean, when Glynne has gone.'

'I should like to catch you at it!' growled Sir John. 'When Glynne goes you've got to stop with me.'

'Ah, well we shall see,' said the major, whose eyes were fixed on the dark corner of the smoking-room, where he could see a fir glade with a pretty, bright little figure stooping over a ring of dark-coloured fungi—'we shall see. Glynne isn't married yet.'

The next morning, soon after breakfast, Rolph started off for a run, for he was training for an event, he said, the run taking him in the direction of the preserves about an hour later.

He had gone for some distance along the path, but he leaped over a fence now and began to thread his way through a pine wood, where every step was over the thick grey needles; and as he walked he from time to time kicked over one of the bright red or speckled grey fungi which grew beneath the trees.

He had about half a mile to go through this wood; the birch plantation and the low copse, and then through the grove in one of the openings of which, and surrounded by firs, stood the keeper's cottage.

He pressed on through the firwood, then across the birch plantation, where the partridges loved to hide, and the copse where the poachers knew the pheasants roosted on the uncut trees at the edge, but dared not go, because it was so near the keeper's cottage.

Then on to Thoreby Wood, in and out among the bronze-red fir-tree trunks, under the dark green boughs, where the wind was always moaning, as if

the sea shore was nigh, and the bed of needles silenced his footfalls, for the way was easy now. In another minute he would be out of the clearing, close to the cottage—at the back.

'Why, there she is,' he said to himself, with his heart giving a throb of satisfaction, as he saw before him a girl standing where the sun shone down through the opening where the cottage stood, and half threw up the figure as it rested one hand upon a tree trunk and leaned forward as if gazing out from the edge of the wood at something in the opening beyond.

Rolph stopped short, to stand gazing at her admiringly.

'What is she watching?' he said to himself, then, smiling as the explanation came.

'Been feeding the pheasants,' he thought. 'She has thrown them some grain, and they have come out by the cottage.'

'Yes,' he continued, 'she is watching them feed, and is standing back so as not to scare them. Poor beggars! what a shame it seems to go and murder them after they have been reared at home and fed like this.'

He hesitated for a few moments, and then began to walk swiftly on, with hushed footsteps, toward where the figure stood, a hundred yards away.

When he saw her first, he was able to gaze down a narrow lane of trees, but a deep gully ran along there, necessitating his diverging from that part, and

going in and out among the tall trunks, sometimes catching a glimpse of the watcher, sometimes for her to be hidden from his sight. And so it was that when at last he came out suddenly, he was not five yards behind her, but unheard. He stopped short, startled and astonished. For it was not Judith who stood watching there so intently.

Madge! there!

At that moment, as if she were impressed by his presence, Marjorie Emlin rose partly erect, drawing back out of the sunshine, and quite involuntarily turning to gaze full in Rolph's face, her own fixed in its expression of malignant joy, as if she had just seen something which had given her the most profound satisfaction. She was laughing, her lips drawn away from her teeth, and her eyes, in the semi-darkness of the fir wood, dilated and glowing with a strange light.

For a moment or two she gazed straight at Rolph, seeing him, but not seeming to realise his presence. Then there was a rapid change of her expression, the malignant look of joy became one of shame, fear, and the horror of being surprised.

'You here, Madge!' he said at last, in a hoarse whisper lest Judith should know that she was being watched. 'What does this mean?'

She looked at him wildly, and began to creep away, as one might from some creature which fascinated and yet filled with fear.

She was still shrinking away, but he had caught her wrist and held it firmly as she glared at him, till, with a sudden effort, she tried to wrest herself away.

There was no struggle, for he suddenly cast her away from him, realising in an instant the reason of her presence and of this malignant look of satisfaction, for, as Madge darted away, he rushed into the opening where the cottage stood, in response to a wild cry for help.

He reached the porch in time to catch Judith on his arm, as she was running from the place, and receive Caleb Kent who was in full pursuit, with his right fist thrown out with all his might.

The impact of two bodies at speed is tremendous, and scientific people of a mathematical turn assure us that when such bodies do meet they fly off at a tangent.

They may have done so here, but, according to matter-of-fact notions, Rolph's fist and arm flew round Judith afterwards, to help the other hold her trembling and throbbing to his heart; while Caleb Kent's head went down with a heavy, resounding bump on the tiled floor of the little entry.

Then Judith shrank away, and Rolph in his rage planted his foot on Caleb Kent's chest, as the fellow lay back, apparently stunned.

But there was a good deal of the wild beast about Caleb Kent. He lay still for a few moments, and then, quick and active as a cat, he twisted himself

sidewise and sprang up, his mouth cut and bleeding, his features distorted with passion; and, starting back, he snatched a long knife from his pocket, threw open the blade, and made a spring at Rolph.

Judith uttered a cry of horror, but there was no occasion for her dread, for, quick in his action as the young poacher, Rolph struck up the attacking arm, and the next moment Caleb Kent was outside, with his opponent following him watchfully.

'Keep of!' snarled Caleb, 'or I'll have your blood. All right: I see; but never mind, my turn will come yet. If I wait for years, I'll make this straight.'

And then as Rolph made a rush at him, he dodged aside and darted into the fir wood, running so swiftly that his adversary felt it would be useless to pursue.

Neither did he wish to, for Judith was standing there by the porch, looking wild-eyed and ghastly.

'You—you are hurt,' she faltered.

'Hurt!' he cried, as he clasped her once more in his arms. 'No, no, tell me about yourself. Curse him! what did he say?'

'I was alone here and busy when he came. He has followed me about from a child and frightened me. To-day he walked straight in and roughly told me that he loved me, and that I must be his wife.'

She shuddered.

'The insolent gaol bird!'

'He frightened me, though I tried very hard to be firm, and ordered him to leave the place; but he

only laughed at me, and caught me in his arms, and tried to kiss me. I was struggling with him for a long time, and no help seemed to be coming. I screamed out, and that frightened him, and he left me; but, before I could fasten the door, he came back and spoke gently to me, but when I would not listen to him, he tried to seize me again, and I cried for help, and you—'

She did not shrink this time, as, throbbing with passion, and uttering threats against the scoundrel, Rolph once more folded her in his arms.

Again she struggled from him, trembling.

'I am not doing right,' she said firmly. 'If you love me, Rob—'

'If I love you!' he said reproachfully.

'I am sure you have pity for me,' she said, taking his hand and raising it to her lips, to utter a cry of horror, for the hand was bleeding freely, and the ruddy current dyed her lips.

'Hurt in my defence,' she said with a pained smile, as she bound her own handkerchief about the bleeding knuckles.

'I'd die in your defence,' he whispered passionately; 'your protector always, dearest.'

'Then protect me now,' she said, 'that I am weak, and let me trust in you. You wish me to be your wife, Robert?'

'Eh? Yes, of course, of course,' he said hurriedly.

'And you won't let your mother sending me away make any difference?'

'How could it, little stupid! I'm not a boy,' he said, banteringly. 'But I must go now, and, as for Master Caleb Kent, I'll just set the policeman on his track.'

'But that will mean his being taken before the magistrates, Rob.'

'Yes, and a long spell for him this time, or I'll know the reason why.'

'No, no,' cried the girl, hurriedly. 'You mustn't do that.'

'Why?'

'Because he hates you enough as it is. He said he'd kill you.'

'Will he?' muttered Rolph, between his teeth.

'And I should have to go before the magistrates as a witness; and there's no knowing what Caleb might say.'

Rolph looked at her searchingly, while she clung to him till he promised to let the matter rest.

'But suppose he comes again?'

'Father will take care of that,' she said confidently. 'But do mind yourself as you go. Caleb may be hiding, and waiting for you.'

'To come back here,' he said sharply.

'If he does, he'll find the door locked,' said Judith quietly. 'Must you go now?'

'Yes: your father may come back.'

'But that doesn't matter now, Rob, does it? Why not tell him we're engaged?'

'No, no: not yet. Leave that to me. Good-bye, now.'

He drew the clinging arms from about his neck rather roughly, gave the girl's lips a hasty kiss, and hurried out and across the clearing, turning back twice as he went to see Judith looking after him, with her face shadowed by tears, and then, as their eyes encountered, beaming with sunshine. And again, after he had passed out of sight, he stole back through the trees to find that she was still wistfully gazing at the spot where she saw him last.

And, as unseen he watched her, his thoughts were many upon her unprotected state, and as to whether he ought not to stay until her father's return.

'No,' he said, 'the beggar will not dare to come back!' and, after making a circuit of the place, and searching in all directions, he walked thoughtfully away, thinking of what must be done with regard to Caleb Kent, and then about his cousin, against whom his indignation grew hotter the more he thought of what he had seen.

'She must have known that Caleb was in the cottage insulting Judith, and she was glorying in it and would not stir a step to save her, when her presence would have been enough to drive the beggar away. Oh, it seems impossible that a woman could be so spiteful. Hang it! Madge has got hold of that

now. It's like being at her mercy. Phew! I'm getting myself in a devil of a mess. I meant to fight shy of her now altogether, but of course no fellow could help running to save a woman in distress.'

He stopped short, for a sudden thought struck him.

'Then Judy hasn't heard about Glynne yet. Confound it all! what a tangle I'm getting in.'

He took out and lit a cigar. Then smoking rapidly, he felt better.

'All right,' he muttered; 'the old woman sets that square, and the sooner they're off the estate the better for everybody. But there's no mistake about it, Judy is deuced nice after all.'

'Day, sir,' said a sharp voice, and Rolph started round to find himself face to face with Hayle.

'Ah, Ben!—you!'

'Yes, sir, me it is,' said the keeper, sternly. 'Down, dogs!'

This to the animals which began to play about the captain.

'Oh, let 'em be,' said Rolph, patting one of the setters on the head.

'Never mind the dogs, sir. I've got something more serious to think about. I suppose you know as the missus has sacked me, and we're off?'

'Yes, Ben, I know; but it was no doing of mine.

'I never thought it was, sir; but me and Judy's to

go at once—anywhere, for aught she cares. She'd like me to emigrate, I think.'

'No, don't do that, Ben. England's big enough.'

'For some people, sir. I don't know as it is for me. Well, sir, I'm sacked, and I dare say it will be a long time before anyone will take me on. My character usen't to be of the best, and the reasons for going 'll be again me. Of course you know why it is.'

'Well—er—I suppose—'

'That'll do, sir. You know well enough, it's about you and my Judy.'

The captain laughed.

'There, sir, you needn't shuffle with me. I'm my gal's father, and we may as well understand one another.'

'My good fellow, recollect whom you are talking to,' said the captain, haughtily.

'I do, sir. My late missus's son; and I recollect that I'm nobody's servant now, only an Englishman as can speak out free like. So I say this out plain. Of course, after what's been going on, you mean to marry my Judith?'

'Marry her? Well—er—Ben—'

'No, you don't,' said the keeper fiercely, so don't tell me no lies, because I know you've been and got yourself engaged to young Miss Glynne over at Brackley.'

'Well, sir, and if I have, what then?' said Rolph haughtily.

'This, sir,' cried the keeper, with his eyes flashing, 'that you've been playing a d—d cowardly mean part to Miss Glynne and to my Judith. You've led my gal on to believe that you meant to marry her, and then you've thrown her over and took up with Sir John Day's gal. And I tell you this; if my Judith hadn't been what she is, and any harm had come of it, you might have said your prayers, for as sure as there's two charges o' shot in this here gun, I'd put one through you.'

'What?'

'You heared what I said, sir, and you know I'm a man of my word. And now, look here: you've been to the lodge to see Judith, for the last time, of course, for if ever you speak to her again, look out. Now, don't deny it, my lad. You've been to my cottage, for it is mine till to-night.'

'Yes, I have been to the lodge, Hayle,' said Rolph, who was thoroughly cowed by the keeper's fierce manner. 'I was going through the wood when, just as I drew near the cottage, I heard a cry for help.'

'What?' roared Hayle.

'I ran to the porch just as a man was after Miss Hayle— Steady there.'

The sound was startling, for involuntarily the keeper had cocked both barrels of his gun; and, as he stood there with his eyes flashing, and the weapon trembling in the air, the three dogs looked as if turned to stone,

their necks outstretched, heads down, and their long feathery tails rigid, waiting for the double report they felt must follow.

'And—and—what did you do?' cried the keeper in a slow, hoarse voice, which, taken in conjunction with the rapid cocking of the gun, made Rolph think that, if it had been the father who had come upon that scene, there might have been a tragedy in Thoreby Wood that day.

'I say, what did you do?' said the keeper again, in a voice full of suppressed passion.

'That!' said Rolph, slowly raising his right hand to unwind from it Judith's soft white handkerchief, now all stained with blood, and display his knuckles denuded of skin.

'Hah!' ejaculated the keeper, as his eyes flashed. 'God bless you for that, sir. You knocked him down?'

'Of course.'

'Yes—yes?'

'And he jumped up and drew his knife and struck at me.'

'But he didn't hit you, sir; he didn't hit you?' cried the keeper, forgetting everything in his excitement as he clutched the young man's arm.

'No; I was too quick for him; and then he ran off into the wood.'

'D—n him!' roared the keeper. 'If I had only been there this would have caught him,' he cried,

patting the stock of his gun. 'I'd have set the dogs on him after I'd given him a couple of charges of shot; I would, sir, so help me God.'

The veins were standing out all over the keeper's brow, as he ground his teeth and shook his great heavy fist.

'But wait a bit. It won't be long before we meet.'

'I am very glad you were not there, Hayle,' said Rolph, after watching the play of the father's features for a few moments.

'Why, sir, why?'

'Because I don't want to have you take your trial for manslaughter.'

'No, no; I had enough of that over the breaking of Jack Harris's head, sir; but—'

'Yes, but,' said Rolph, quickly, 'I wanted to talk to you about that.'

'It was Caleb Kent,' said the keeper, with sudden excitement.

'Yes, it was Caleb Kent.'

'I might have known it; he was always for following her about. Curse him! But talking's no good, sir; and, perhaps, it's as well I wasn't there. Thankye, sir, for that. It makes us something more like quits. As for Caleb Kent, perhaps I shall have a talk to him before I go. But mind you don't speak to my Judy again.'

He shouldered his gun, gave Rolph a nod, and then walked swiftly away, the dogs hesitating for a few

moments, and then dashing off, to follow close at his heels.

Rolph stood watching the keeper for a few minutes till he disappeared.

'Well out of that trouble then,' he muttered. 'Not pleasant for a fellow; it makes one feel so small. Poor little Judy! she'll be horribly wild when she comes to know. What a lot of misery our marriage laws do cause in this precious world.'

'Now then for home,' he said, after walking swiftly for a few minutes, and, 'putting on a spurt' as he termed it, he reached the house and went straight to the library.

He had entered and closed the door to sit down and have a good think about how he could 'square Madge,' when he became aware that the lady in his thoughts was seated in one of the great arm-chairs with a book in her hand, which she pretended to read. She cowered as her cousin started, and stood gazing down at her with a frowning brow, and a look of utter disgust and contempt about his lips which made her bosom rise and fall rapidly.

'Do you want this room, Rob?' she said, breaking an awkward silence.

'Well, yes, after what took place this morning, you do make the place seem unpleasant,' he said coolly.

'Oh, this is too much,' cried Madge, her face, the moment before deadly pale, now flushing scarlet, as

she threw down the book she had held, and stood before him, biting her lips with rage.

'Yes, too much.'

'And have we been to the cottage to see the fair idol? Pray explain,' said Marjorie, who was beside herself with rage and jealousy. 'I thought gentlemen who were engaged always made an end of their vulgar amours.'

'Quite right,' said Rolph, meaningly. 'I did begin, as you know.'

She winced, and her eyes darted an angry flash at him.

'You mean me,' she said, with her lips turning white.

'I did not say so.'

'But would it not have been better, now we are engaged to Glynne Day—I don't understand these things, of course—but would it not have been better for a gentleman, now that he is engaged, to cease visiting that creature, and, above all, to keep away when he was not wanted?'

'What do you mean?—not wanted?'

'I mean when she was engaged with her lover, who was visiting her in her father's absence.'

'The scoundrel!' cried Rolph, fiercely.

'Yes; a miserable, contemptible wretch, I suppose, but an old flame of hers.'

'Look here, Madge; you're saying all this to make me wild,' cried Rolph, 'but it won't do. You know it's a lie.'

Madge laughed unpleasantly.

'It's true. He was always after her. She told me so herself, and how glad she was that the wretch had been sent to prison—of course, because he was in the way just then.'

'Go on,' growled Rolph. 'A jealous woman will say anything.'

'Jealous?—I?—Pah!—Only angry with myself because I was so weak as to listen to you.'

'And I was so weak as to say anything to a malicious, deceitful cat of a girl, who is spiteful enough to do anything.'

'I, spiteful?—Pah!'

'Well, malicious then.'

'Perhaps I shall be. I wonder what dear Glynne would say about this business. Suppose I told her that our honourable and gallant friend, as they call it in parliament, had been on a visit to that shameless creature whom poor auntie had been compelled to turn away from the house, and in his honourable and gallant visit arrived just in time to witness the end of a lover's quarrel; perhaps you joined in for ought I know, and—I can't help laughing— Poor fellow! You did. You have been fighting with your rival, and bruised your knuckles. Did he beat you much, Rob, and win?'

Robert Rolph was dense and brutal enough, and his cousin's words made him wince, but he looked at the speaker in disgust as the malevolence

of her nature forced itself upon him more and more.

'Well,' he cried at last, 'I've seen some women in my time, but I never met one yet who could stand by and glory in seeing one whom she had looked upon as a sister insulted like poor Judy was.'

'A sister!' cried Majorie, contemptuously. 'Absurd!—a low-born trull!'

'Whom you called dear, and kissed often enough till you thought I liked her, and then— Hang it all, Madge, are you utterly without shame!'

She shrank from him as if his words were thongs which cut into her flesh, but as he ceased speaking, with a passionate sob, she flung her arms about his neck, and clung tightly there.

'Rob! Don't, I can't bear it,' she cried. 'You don't know what I have suffered—what agony all this has caused.'

'There, there, that will do,' he said contemptuously. 'I am engaged, my dear.'

She sprang from him, and a fierce light burned in her eyes for a moment, but disappointment and her despair were too much for her, and she flung herself upon his breast.

'No, no, Rob, dear, it isn't true. I couldn't help hating Judith or any woman who came between us. You don't mean all this, and it is only to try me. You cannot—you shall not marry Glynne; and as to Judith, it is impossible now.'

'Give over,' he said roughly, as he tried to free himself from her arms.

'No, you sha'n't go. I must tell you,' she whispered hoarsely amidst her sobs. 'I hate Judith, but she is nothing—not worthy of a thought. I will never mention her name to you again, dear.'

'Don't pray,' he cried sarcastically. 'If you do, I shall always be seeing you gloating over her trouble as I saw you this morning.'

'It was because I loved you so, Rob,' she murmured as she nestled to him. 'It was because I felt that you were mine and mine only, after the past; and all that was forcing her away from you.'

'Bah!' he cried savagely. 'Madge! Don't be a fool! Will you loosen your hands before I hurt you.'

But she clung to him still.

'No, not yet,' she whispered. 'You made me love you, Rob, and I forget everything in that. Promise me first that you will break all that off about Glynne Day.'

'I promise you that I'll get your aunt to place you in a private asylum,' he cried brutally, 'if you don't leave go.'

There was a slight struggle, and he tore himself free, holding her wrists together in his powerful grasp and keeping her at arm's length.

'There! Idiot!' he cried. 'Must I hold you till you come to your senses.'

'If you wish—brute!' she cried through her little white teeth as her lips were drawn away. 'Kill me if you like now. I don't care a bit: you can't hurt me more than you have.'

'If I hurt you, it serves you right. A nice, lady-like creature, 'pon my soul. Pity my mother hasn't been here to see the kind of woman she wanted me to marry.'

'Go on,' she whispered, 'go on. Insult me: you have a right. Go on.'

'I'm going off,' he said roughly. 'There, go up to your room, and have a good hysterical cry and a wash, and come back to your senses. If you will have it you shall, and the whole truth too. I never cared a bit for you. It was all your own doing, leading me on. Want to go.'

'Loose my hands, brute.'

'For you to scratch my face, my red-haired pussy. Not such a fool. I know your sweet temper of old. If I let go, will you be quiet?'

Marjorie made no reply, but she ceased to struggle and stood there with her wrists held, the white skin growing black—a prisoner—till, with a contemptuous laugh, he threw the little arms from him.

'Go and tell Glynne everything you know—everything you have seen, if you like,' he said harshly, 'only tell everything about yourself too, and then come back to me to be loved, my sweet, amiable, little white-faced tigress. I'm not afraid though, Madge. You can't

open those pretty lips of yours, can you? It might make others speak in their defence.'

'Brute,' she whispered as she gazed at him defiantly and held out her bruised wrists.

'Brute, am I? Well, let sleeping brutes lie. Don't try to rouse them up for fear they should bite. Go to your room and bathe your pretty red eyes after having a good cry, and then come and tell me that you think it is best to cry truce, and forget all the past.'

'Never, Rob, dear,' she said with a curious smile. 'Go on; but mind this: you shall never marry Glynne Day.'

'Sha'n't I? We shall see. I think I can pull that off,' he cried with a mocking laugh. 'But if I don't, whom shall I marry?'

She turned from him slowly, and then faced round again as she reached the door.

'Me,' she said quietly; and the next minute Robert Rolph was alone.

CHAPTER X.

A CLOUDY SKY.

'Oh, father, I'm so glad you've come.'

This was Ben Hayle's greeting as he reached the keeper's lodge.

'Eh? Are you?' he said, with an assumed look of ignorance; but the corners of his eyes were twitching, and he was asking himself how he was to tell his child matters that would nearly break her heart, as he yielded his hand to hers, and let her press him back into his windsor arm-chair. 'Nothing the matter, is there?'

She knelt at his feet, and told him all that had passed, and the strong man's muscles jerked, and his grasp of her arm grew at times painful. As she went on, he interjected a savage word from time to time.

'Good girl, good girl. It has hurt you, my darling, but it was right to tell me all, and keep nothing back.'

Then he laid his hand softly on her glossy hair, and sat staring straight before him at the window, the moments being steadily marked off by the *tick-tack* of

the old eight-day clock in the corner, and no other sound was heard in the room.

Outside, the silence of the fir wood was broken by the cheery lay of a robin in one of the apple-trees of the garden, and once there came the low, soft cooing of a dove, which the soft, sunny autumn day had deluded into the belief that it was spring.

Then all was again silent for a time, and it seemed to Judith, as she looked up into the stern, thoughtful face, with its dark, fierce eyes, that the heavy throbbing of her heart drowned the beat of the clock; at other times the regular *tick-tack* grew louder, and she could hear nothing else.

'You're not cross with me, father?' she said at last.

'No, it was no fault of yours. Ah, Judy, my girl, I was so proud of your bonny face, but it seems as if it is like to be a curse to you—to us both.'

'Father!'

'Yes, my lass; and I don't know which of they two we ought to be most scared of—Caleb Kent or the captain.'

'Oh! father!' cried Judith; and she let her head fall upon his knee, as she sobbed wildly.

'I need hardly ask you, then, my girl,' he said, as with tender, loving hands, he took her head and bent over it, with his dark, fierce eyes softening. 'You like him, then?'

She looked up proudly.

'He loves me, father.'

'Ay, and you, my lassie?'

'Yes, father. I have tried very hard not to think about him, but— Yes, I do love him very dearly, and I'm going to be his wife. He said he would speak to you.'

'Yes, my dear, and he has spoken to me.'

'Oh!' she cried, as she reached up to lay her hands upon the keeper's shoulders, and gaze inquiringly in his eyes.

'It was all one big blunder, my dear,' he said; 'you ought never to have gone up to the house, and learned things to make you above your station. I used to think so, as I sat here o' night's and smoked my pipe, and say to myself, "She'll never care for the poor old cottage again."'

Judith looked up quickly, and her arm stole round her father's neck.

'And then,' she whispered, 'you said to yourself, "It is not true, for she'll never forget the old home."'

'You're a witch, Judy,' he cried, drawing her to him, with his face brightening a little. 'I did. And if it could have been that you'd wed the captain, and gone up to the house among the grand folk, you would have had me there; you would not have been ashamed of the old man—would you?'

'Why do you ask me that, dear?' said Judith, with her lips quivering. 'You know—you know.'

'Yes,' he said, 'I know. But we shall have to go away from the old place, Judy, for it can't never be.'

'Oh, father!'

'No, my dear, it won't do. It's all been a muddle, and I ought to have known better, instead of being a proud old fool, pleased as could be to see my lassie growing into a lady. There, I may as well tell you the truth, lass, at once.'

'The truth, father?' she said sharply.

'Yes, my dear, though it goes again me to hurt your poor little soft heart.'

'What do you mean, father?' she cried, startled now by the keeper's looks.

'It must come, Judy; but I wish you'd found it out for yourself. Young Robert isn't the man his dead father was. He's a liar and a scoundrel, girl, and—'

She sprang from him with her eyes flashing, and a look of angry indignation convulsing her features.

'It's true, my girl. He never meant to marry you, only to make you his plaything because he liked your pretty face.'

'It isn't true,' said the girl harshly; and the indignation in her breast against her father made her wonderfully like him now.

'It is true, Judy, my pretty. I wouldn't lie to you, and half break your heart. You've got to face it along with me. We're sent away because the captain is going to marry.

'It isn't true, father; he wouldn't marry Madge Emlin, with her cruel, deceitful heart.'

'No, my lass; he's chucked her over too. He's going to marry Sir John Day's gal, over at Brackley Hall—her who came here and painted your face in the sun bonnet, when you were home those few days the time I had rheumatiz.'

'Is this true, father?'

'As true as gospel, lass.'

She gave him a long, searching look, as if reading his very soul, and then crept back to a low chair, sank down, and buried her face in her hands.

'Hah!' he said to himself, 'she takes it better than I thought for. Thank God, it wasn't too late.'

He stood thinking for a few minutes.

'Where am I to get a cottage, Judy, my lass?' he said at last. 'One of those at Lindham might do for the present, out there by your grandmother's, if there's one empty. Mother Wattley would know. I'll go and see her. Let's get out of this. Poor old place, though,' he said, as he looked round. 'It seems rather hard.'

Judith had raised her head, and sat gazing straight before her, right into the future, but she did not speak.

CHAPTER XI.

IN A MIST.

GLYNNE DAY was seated in her favourite place—a bright, cheerful-looking room connected with her bed-chamber on the first floor at Brackley, and turned by her into a pleasant nest; for the French windows opened into a tiny conservatory over a broad bay window of the dining-room, where were displayed the choicest floral gems that Jones, the head gardener, could raise, all being duly tended by her own hands.

The gardener shook his head, and said that 'the plahnts wiltered' for want of light, and wanted to cut away the greater part of the tendril-like stems of the huge wistaria, which twisted itself into cables, and formed loops and sprays all over the top glass; but Glynne looked at him in horror, and forbade him to cut a stem. Consequently, in the spring-time, great lavender racemes of the lovely flowers clustered about the broad window at which the mistress of the Hall loved to sit and sketch 'bits' of the beautiful landscape around, and make study after study of the precipitous pine-crowned hill a mile away, behind

whose dark trees the sun would set, and give her opportunities to paint in gorgeous hues the tints of the western sky.

Here Lucy Alleyne would be brought after their walks, to sit and read, while Glynne filled in sketches she had made; and many a pleasant hour was passed by the two girls, while the soft breezes of the sunny country waved the long wistaria strands.

'It's no use for me to speak, Mr Morris,' said the gardener one day. 'It 'most breaks my heart, for all about there, and under the little glass house is the untidiest bit about my garden. I told Sir John about it, and he said, "Why don't you cut it then, booby?" and when I told him why, and ast him to speak to Miss Glynne, he said, "Be off, and leave it alone."'

'And of course you did,' said Morris, the butler.

'Sack's the word if I hadn't, sir. But you mark my words: one of these days—I mean nights—them London burglars 'll give us a visit, and they won't want no ladder to get up to the first-floor windows. A baby could climb up them great glycene ropes and get in at that window; and then away goes my young lady's jewels.'

'Well, they won't get my plate,' said Morris with a chuckle. 'I've two loaded pistols in my pantry for anyone who comes, so let 'em look out; and if I shout for help, the major's got his loaded too.'

Glynne Day was seated one afternoon in her conservatory, bending over her last water-colour sketch

by the open window, when a loud, reverberating bang echoed along the corridor, making the windows rattle outside her room. Starting up, knowing from old experience that it was only an earthquake, one of the social kind which affected Brackley from time to time, she hurried into her little study, and out into the passage, to go to the end, and tap sharply at the door facing her.

'Come in,' was shouted in the same tones as he who uttered the order had cried 'wheel into line!' and Glynne entered to find the major with his hair looking knotted, his moustache bristling, and his eyes rolling in their sockets.

'What is the matter, uncle?'

'Matter?' cried the major, who was purple with rage. 'Matter? He's your father, Glynne, and he's my brother, but if—if I could only feel that it wasn't wicked to cut him down with the sword I used at Chillianwallah, I'd be thankful.'

'Now, uncle, dear, you don't feel anything of the kind,' said Glynne, leaning upon the old gentleman's arm.

'I do feel it, and I mean it this time. Now, girl, look here! Why am I such an old idiot—'

'Oh, uncle!'

'—As to stop here, and let that bullying, farm-labouring, overbearing bumpkin—I beg your pardon, my dear, but he is—father of yours, ride rough-shod over me?'

'But, uncle, dear—'

'But, niece, dear, he does; and how I can be such an idiot as to stop here, I don't know. If I were his dependent, it couldn't be worse.'

'But, uncle, dear, I'm afraid you do show a little temper sometimes.'

'Temper! I show temper! Nothing of the kind,' cried the old fellow, angrily, and his grey curls seemed to stand out wildly from his head. 'Only decision—just so much decision as a military man should show—nothing more. Temper, indeed!'

'But you are hasty, dear, and papa so soon gets warm.'

'Warm? Red hot. White hot. He has a temper that would irritate a saint, and heaven knows I am no saint.'

'It does seem such a pity for you and papa to quarrel.'

'Pity? It's abominable, my child, when we might live together as peaceably as pigeons. But he shall have it his own way now. I've done. I'll have no more of it. I'm not a child.'

'What are you going to do, uncle?'

'Do? Pack up and go, this very day. Then he may come to my chambers and beg till all's blue, but he'll never persuade me to come out here again.'

'Oh, uncle! It will be so dull if you go away.'

'No, no, not it, my dear. You've got your captain; and there'll be peace in the house then till he finds someone else to bully. Why, I might be one of his

farm labourers; that I might. But there's an end of it now.'

'But, uncle!' cried Glynne, looking perplexed and troubled, 'come back with me into the library. I'm sure, if papa was in the wrong, he'll be sorry.'

'If he was in the wrong! He *was* in the wrong. Me go to him? Not I. My mind's made up. I'll not have my old age embittered by his abominable temper. Don't stop me, girl. I'm going, and nothing shall stay me now.'

'How tiresome it is!' said Glynne, softly, as her broad, white forehead grew full of wrinkles. 'Dear uncle; he must not go. I must do something,' and then, with a smile dawning upon her perplexed face, she descended the stairs, and went softly to the library door, opened it gently, and found Sir John tramping up and down the Turkey carpet, like some wild beast in its cage.

'Who's that? How dare you enter without— Oh, it's you, Glynne.'

'Yes, papa. Uncle has gone upstairs and banged his door.'

'I'm glad of it; I'm very glad of it,' cried Sir John, 'and I hope it's for the last time.'

'What has been the matter, papa?' said Glynne, laying her hands upon his shoulders. 'Sit down, dear, and tell me.'

'No, no, my dear, don't bother me. I don't want to sit down, Glynne.'

'Yes, yes, dear, and tell me all about it.'

Fighting against it all the while, the choleric baronet allowed himself to be pressed down into one of the easy-chairs, Glynne drawing a footstool to his side, sitting at his feet, and clasping and resting her hands upon his knees.

'Well, there, now; are you satisfied?' he said, half laughing, half angry.

'No, papa. I want to know why you and uncle quarrelled.'

'Oh, the old reason,' said Sir John, colouring. 'He will be as obstinate as a mule, and the more you try to reason with him, the more he turns to you his hind legs and kicks.'

'Did you try to reason with Uncle James, papa?'

'Did I try to reason with him? Why, of course I did, but you might as well try to reason with a stone trough.'

'What was it about?' said Glynne, quietly.

'What was it about? Oh, about the—about the—bless my soul, what did it begin about? Some, some, some—dear me, how absurd, Glynne. He upset me so that it has completely gone out of my head. What do you mean? What do you mean by shaking your head like that? Confound it all, Glynne, are you going to turn against me?'

'Oh, papa, papa, how sad it is,' said Glynne, gently. 'You have upset poor uncle like this all about some

trifle of so little consequence that you have even forgotten what it was.'

'I beg your pardon, madam,' cried Sir John, trying to rise, but Glynne laid her hand upon his chest and kept him back. 'It was no trifle, and it is no joke for your Uncle James to launch out in his confounded haughty, military way, and try to take the reins from my hands. I'm master here. I remember now; it was about Rob.'

'Indeed, papa!' said Glynne, with a sad tone in her voice.

'Yes, finding fault about his training. I don't want him to go about like some confounded foot-racing fellow, but he's my son-in-law elect, and he shall do as he pleases. What next, I wonder? Your uncle will be wanting to manage my farm.'

Glynne remained very thoughtful and silent for a few minutes, during which time her father continued to fume, and utter expressions of annoyance, till Glynne said suddenly as she looked up in his face,—

'You were wrong, papa, dear. You should not quarrel with Uncle James.'

'Wrong? Wrong? Why, the girl's mad,' cried Sir John. 'Do you approve of his taking your future husband to task over his amusements?'

'I don't know,' said Glynne slowly, as she turned her great, frank-looking eyes upon her father. 'I don't know, papa, dear. I don't think I do; but

Uncle James is so good and wise, and I know he loves me very much.'

'Of course he does; so does everybody else,' cried the baronet, excitedly. 'I should like to see the man who did not. But I will not have his interference here, and I'm very glad—very glad indeed—that he is going.'

'Uncle James meant it for the best, I'm sure, papa,' said Glynne, thoughtfully, 'and it was wrong of you to quarrel with him.'

'I tell you I did not quarrel with him, Glynne; he quarrelled with me,' roared Sir John.

'And you ought to go and apologise to him.'

'I'd go and hang myself sooner. I'd sooner go and commit suicide in my new patent thrashing-machine.'

'Nonsense, papa, dear,' said Glynne quietly. 'You ought to go and apologise. If you don't, Uncle James will leave us.'

'Let him.'

'And then you will be very much put out and grieved.'

'And a good job too. I mean a good job if he'd leave, for then we should have peace in the place.'

'Now, papa!'

'I tell you I'd be very glad of it; a confounded peppery old Nero, talking to me as if I were a private under him. Bully me, indeed! I won't stand it. There!'

'Papa, dear, go upstairs and apologise to Uncle James.'

'I won't, Glynne. There's an end of it now. Just because he can't have everything his own way. He has never forgiven me for being the eldest son and taking the baronetcy. Was it my fault that I was born first?'

'Now, papa, dear, that's talking at random; I don't believe Uncle James ever envied you for having the title.'

'Then he shouldn't act as if he did. Confound him!'

'Then you'll go up and speak to him. Come, dear, don't let's have this cloud over the house!'

'Cloud? I'll make it a regular tempest,' cried Sir John, furiously. 'I'll go upstairs and see that he does go, and at once. See if I ferret him out of his nasty, dark, stuffy, dismal chambers again. Brought him down here, and made a healthy, hearty man of him, and this is my reward.'

'Is that you talking, papa?' said Glynne, rising with him, for he made a rush now out of his seat, and she smiled in his face as she put her arms round his neck and kissed him.

'Bah! Get out! Pst! Puss!' cried Sir John, and swinging round, he strode out of the library, and banged the door as if he had caught his brother's habit.

Glynne stood looking after him, smiling as she listened to his steps on the polished oak floor of the

hall, and then seemed quite satisfied as she detected the fact that he had gone upstairs. Then it was that a dreamy, strange look came into her eyes, and she stood there, with one hand resting upon the table, thinking—thinking—thinking of the cause of the quarrel, of the words her uncle had spoken regarding Rolph; and it seemed to her that there was a mist before her, stretching out farther and farther, and hiding the future.

For the major was always so gentle and kind to her. He never spoke to her about Rolph as he had spoken to her father; but she had noticed that he was a little cold and sarcastic sometimes towards her lover.

Was there trouble coming? Did she love Robert as dearly as she should?

She wanted answers to these questions, and the responses were hidden in the mist ahead. Then, as she gazed, it seemed to her that her future was like the vast space into which she had looked from her window by night; and though for a time it was brightened with dazzling, hopeful points, these again became clouded over, and all was misty and dull once more.

CHAPTER XII.

THE PROFESSOR IN COMPANY.

SIR JOHN went upstairs furiously, taking three steps at a time—twice. Then he finished that flight two at a time; walked fast up the first half of the second flight, one step at a time; slowly up the second half; paused on the landing, and then went deliberately along the corridor, with its row of painted ancestors watching him from one side, as if wondering when he was coming to join them there.

Sir John Day was a man who soon made up his mind, whether it was about turning an arable field into pasture, or the setting of a new kind of corn. He settled in five minutes to have steam upon the farm, and did not ponder upon Glynne's engagement for more than ten; so that he was able to make his plans very well in the sixty feet that he had to traverse before he reached his brother's door, upon whose panel he gave a tremendous thump, and then entered at once.

The major was in his shirt-sleeves, apparently turning himself into a jack-in-the-box, for he was standing in an old bullock trunk, one which had

journeyed with him pretty well all over India; and as Sir John entered the room sharply, and closed the door behind him, the major started up, looking fiercely and angrily at the intruder.

'Oh, you're packing, then?' said Sir John, in the most uncompromising tone.

'Yes, sir, I am packing,' said the major, getting out of the trunk, and slamming down the lid; 'and I think, sir, that I might be permitted to do that in peace and quietness.'

'Peace? Yes, of course you may,' said Sir John, sharply, 'only you will make it war.'

'I was not aware,' said the major, that it was necessary for me to lock my door—I beg your pardon—your door. And now, may I ask the object of this intrusion? If it is to resume the quarrel, you may spare yourself the pains.'

'Indeed!' said Sir John shortly.

'Well,' continued the major, 'why have you come?'

'You are going, then?'

'Of course I am, sir.'

'Well, I came to tell you I'm very glad of it,' cried Sir John, clapping his brother on the shoulder; and then—'I say, Jem, I wish I hadn't such a peppery temper.'

'No, no, Jack, no, no,' cried the major, excitedly; 'it was I who was to blame.'

'Wrong, Jem. I contradicted you—very offensively, too, and I am confoundedly in the wrong. I

didn't know it till Glynne came and pulled me up short. I say, it's a great pity for us to quarrel, isn't it?'

'Yes,' said the major, laying his hands upon his brother's shoulders, 'it is—it is, indeed, Jack, and I can't help thinking that I shall be doing wisely in going back to my old chambers, for this projected wedding worries me. We'll see one another more seldom, and we won't have words together then. You see—no; stop a moment! Let me speak. You see, I feel my old wound now and then, and it makes me irritable, and then the climate has touched up my liver a bit. Yes, I had better go.'

'Don't be a fool, Jem,' cried Sir John. 'Go, indeed! Why, what the dickens do you suppose I should do without you here? Tchah! tush! you go! Absurd. There, get dressed, man, and come down to dinner. No: come along down with me first, and we'll get a bottle or two out of the number six bin. There'll just be time.'

The major shook his head, as he looked at the bullock trunk and a very much bruised and battered old portmanteau waiting to be filled.

'Now, Jem, old fellow, don't let's quarrel again,' cried Sir John, pathetically.

'No, no, certainly not, my dear Jack. No more quarrelling, but I think this time I'll hold to my word.'

'Now, my dear old fellow,' cried Sir John, grip-

ping his brother's shoulders more tightly, and shaking him to and fro, 'do be reasonable. Look here: I've asked little Lucy Alleyne to come *sans façon*, and—'

'Is she coming?' cried the major, eagerly.

'Yes, and you can talk toadstools as long as you like.'

The major seemed to be hesitating, and he looked curiously at his brother.

'Is Alleyne coming?'

'I asked him, but he is very doubtful; perhaps he is glued to the end of his telescope for the next twelve hours. Here, have that confounded baggage put away.'

The major looked a little more thoughtful. He was hesitating, and thinking of Glynne, who just then tapped softly at the door.

'Come in,' roared Sir John; and she entered, looked quickly from one to the other, and then went up to her uncle, and kissed him affectionately.

'There,' cried Sir John, looking half-pleased, half-annoyed; 'it's enough to make a man wish you would go, Jem.'

'No, it isn't,' said the major, drawing his niece closer to him. 'There, there, my dear, you were quite right. I'm a terrible old capsicum, am I not?'

'No, uncle,' said Glynne, nestling to him; 'but hadn't we better forget all this?'

'Right, my dear, right,' cried Sir John. 'There,

come along, and let your uncle dress for dinner. Where's Rob?'

'I think he went for a long walk, papa.'

'Humph! I hope he'll be in training at last,' said Sir John, good-humouredly. 'You're a lucky girl, Glynne, to have a man wanting to make himself perfect before he marries you. You ought to go and do likewise.'

'Don't try, Glynne, my dear,' said her uncle affectionately. 'A perfect woman would be a horror. You are just right as you are.'

'Well, you are not, Jem,' said Sir John, laughing, 'so make haste, and come down. Come along, Glynne.'

He led the way, and, as he passed through the door, Glynne turned to look back at her uncle, their eyes meeting in a peculiarly wistful, inquiring look, that seemed to suggest a mutual desire to know the other's thoughts.

Then the door closed, and in the most matter-of-fact way, the major proceeded to dress for dinner as if he had never quarrelled with his brother in his life.

When he descended, it was to find Alleyne in the drawing-room with his sister. Glynne was entertaining them, for Sir John had, on leaving his brother, gone down into the cellar for the special bottle of port, and, after its selection, found so much satisfaction in the mildewy, sawdusty, damp-smelling

place that he stopped for some twenty minutes, poking his bedroom candlestick into dark corners and archways where the bottoms of bottles could be seen resting as they had rested for many years past—each bin having a little history of its own, so full of recollections that the baronet had at last to drag himself away, and hurry up to dress.

Rolph was also late—so much so that he had encountered Sir John on the stairs, and the party in the drawing-room had a good quarter of an hour's chat in the twilight, before the candles were lit.

'And you think it possible that it is caused by another planet?' Glynne was saying as the major entered the room; and he paused for a moment or two noting the change that had come over his niece. There was an eager look in her eyes; her face was more animated as she sat in the window catching the last reflections of the western glow, listening the while to Alleyne, who, with his back to the light, was talking in a low, deep voice of some problem in his favourite pursuit.

'Yes; just as happened over Neptune. That appears to be the only solution of the difficulty,' he replied.

'Then why not direct your glass exactly at the place where you feel this planet must be?'

Alleyne smiled as he spoke next.

'I did not explain to you,' he said, 'that if such a

planet does exist it must be, comparatively, very small, and so surrounded by the intense light of the sun that no glass we have yet made would render it visible.'

'How strange!' said Glynne, thoughtfully; and her eyes vaguely wandered over the evening sky, and then back to rest in a rapt, dreamy way upon the quiet, absorbed face of the visitor.

'I was looking at Jupiter last night,' she said, suddenly, 'trying to see his moons.'

'Yes?'

'But our glass is not sufficiently powerful. I could only distinguish two.'

'Perhaps it was not the fault of your glass,' said Alleyne, smiling. 'A glass of a very low power will show them. I have often watched them through a good binocular.'

'I'm afraid ours is a very bad one,' said Glynne.

'No, I should be more disposed to think it a good one, Miss Day. The reason you did not see them is this; one was eclipsed by the planet—in other words, behind it—while the others are passing across its body, whose brightness almost hides them—in fact, does hide them to such an extent that they would not be seen by you.'

There was a few minutes' silence here, broken at last by Glynne, as she said in a low, thoughtful voice,—

'How much you know. How grand it must be.'

Alleyne laughed softly before replying.

'How much I know!' he said, in a voice full of regret. 'My dear madam, I know just enough to see what a very little I have learned; how pitifully small in such a science as astronomy is all that a life devoted to its depths would be.'

'For shame, Moray,' cried Lucy, warmly. 'You know that people say you are very clever indeed.'

'Yes,' he replied, 'I know what they say; but that is only their judgment. I know how trifling are the things I have learned compared with what there is to acquire.'

'What a goose Glynne is,' said the major to himself, as he stood listening to the conversation. 'Why, this man is worth a dozen Rolphs.'

'But, Mr Alleyne,' said Glynne, eagerly, 'is it possible—could I—I mean, should you think I was asking too much if I expressed a wish to see something of these wonders of which you have been speaking?'

'Oh, no, Moray would show you everything he could. He's the most unselfish, patient fellow in the world,' cried Lucy.

Glynne turned from her almost impatiently to Alleyne, who said, with a grave smile upon his face,—

'You have no brother, Miss Day. If you had, I hope you would not do all you could, by flattery and spoiling, to make him weak and conceited.'

'Indeed I don't do anything of the kind, Moray,' said Lucy, indignantly; 'and now, for that, I'll tell the truth, Glynne; he's a regular bat, an owl, a recluse, and we're obliged to drag him out into the light of day, or he'd stop in his room till he grew mouldy, that he would. Why, he goes in spirit right away to the moon sometimes, and it only seems as if his body was left behind.'

'What, do you mean to say he's moonstruck?' said the major, merrily, and looking half-surprised at the quick, indignant look darted at him by Glynne.

'I'm afraid that Lucy here is quite right,' said Alleyne, smiling as he took his sister's hand in his and patted it. 'I do get so intent upon my studies that all every-day life affairs are regularly forgotten. But I do not work half so hard now. They fetched a doctor to me, and it is forbidden. In fact, I have plenty of time now, and if Miss Day will pay my my poor observatory a visit, I will show her everything that lies in my power.'

'Oh, Mr Alleyne, I should be so glad,' cried Glynne eagerly, and to Lucy's great delight. 'I want to see Saturn's rings, and the seas and continents in Mars, and the twin stars.'

'Well, you needn't trouble Mr Alleyne,' said Rolph, who had just entered. 'There's a fellow at Hyde Park corner, with a big glass, lets people look through for a penny. He'd be glad enough to come down for a half-crown or two.'

'Why, how absurd, Robert,' said Glynne, turning upon him good-humouredly. 'I want to see and learn about these things from someone who is an astronomer.'

'Oh,' said Rolph, 'do you? Well, I see no reason why you shouldn't go and have a peep or two through Mr Alleyne's glass. I'll come with you.'

'Here, I'm very sorry, Alleyne. Miss Alleyne, I don't know what sort of a host you'll think me for being so late,' cried Sir John, bustling in. 'I hope Glynne has been playing my part well.'

'Admirably, Sir John,' replied Alleyne. 'We have been talking upon my favourite topic, and the time soon glides by when one is engaged upon questions regarding the planets.'

'But I say, you know, Mr Alleyne,' said Rolph, who, with all the confidence of one in his own house and proprietary rights over the lady, came and seated himself upon the elbow of the easy-chair in which Glynne reclined, and laid his arm behind her on the back, 'I want to know what's the good of a fellow sacrificing his health, and shutting himself up from society, for the study of these abstruse scientific matters. 'Pon my word, I can't see what difference it makes to us whether Jupiter has got one moon, or ten moons, or a hundred. He's such a precious long way off.'

Glynne looked up at him with a good-humoured air of pain, but only to turn back and listen to Alleyne.

'It requires study, Captain Rolph,' he said thoughtfully, 'and time to appreciate the value of the results achieved in astronomy. Perhaps we have nothing to show that is of direct utility to man, but everything in nature is so grand—there is so much to be learned, that, for my part, I wonder why everybody does not thirst for knowledge.'

'Yes,' said Glynne, thoughtfully, and below her breath.

'Oh, we all dabble in science, more or less,' said Rolph, glancing at Sir John with a look that seemed to say, 'You see how I'll trot him out.' 'Here's the major goes in for toadstools, and Sir John for big muttons and portly pigs.'

'And Captain Rolph for exhibitions of endurance, to prove that a man is stronger than a horse,' said the major, drily.

'Yes, and not a bad thing, either, eh, Sir John?'

'Oh, every man to his taste,' said the host; 'but I believe in a man feeding himself up, and not starving himself down.'

'Oilcake and turnips, eh?'

'Yes, both good things in their way, but I like the chemical components to have taken other forms, Rob, my boy; good Highland Scots beef and Southdown mutton.'

'I hope you will be able to indulge in a good dinner, Rolph?' said the major, looking at the young officer as if he amused him.

'Trust me for that, major,' replied the young man loudly. 'I'm not bad at table.'

'I thought, perhaps,' said the major sarcastically, 'that you might be in training, and forbidden to eat anything but raw steak and dry biscuit.'

'Oh, dear, no,' said Rolph seriously. 'Quite free now, major, quite free.'

'That's a blessing,' muttered Sir John, who looked annoyed and fidgety. 'Hah, dinner at last.'

'Walking makes me hungry and impatient, Miss Alleyne. Come along, you are my property. First lady.'

He held out his arm, and, as Lucy laid her little hand upon it, he went out of the drawing-room chatting merrily; and, as he did so, Rolph leaped from his seat, and drew himself upright as if to display the breadth of his chest and the size of his muscles.

'Glad of it,' he said. 'I'm sharp set. Come along, Glynne.'

Alleyne gazed at them intently with a strange feeling of depression coming over his spirit, and so lost to other surroundings that he did not reply to the major, who came up to him, moved by a desire to be polite to a man whom he was beginning to esteem.

Then Major Day drew back and his keen eyes brightened, for Glynne said quietly,—

'You forget. Go on in with uncle.'

'Eh?' said the young officer, looking puzzled.

'Go on in with my uncle,' said Glynne quietly.

And she crossed to where Alleyne was standing, and, in the character of hostess, laid her hand upon his arm.

'There, you're dismissed for to-night, Rolph,' said the major, who could hardly conceal his satisfaction at this trifling incident.

Then, thrusting his arm through that of the athlete, he marched him to the dining-room, the young man's face growing dark and full of annoyance at having to give way in this case of ordinary etiquette.

'Confound the fellow! I wish they wouldn't ask him here,' he muttered.

'Mind seems to be taking the lead over muscles to-day,' said the major to himself, as he walked beside the young officer to the dining-room, while Glynne came more slowly behind, her eyes growing deeper and very thoughtful as she listened to Alleyne's words.

CHAPTER XIII.

MARS MAKES A MISTAKE.

THE dinner, with its pleasant surroundings of flowers and glittering plate and glass, with the finest and whitest of linen, was delightful to Lucy, though to her it was as if there was something wanting, in spite of her position as principal guest. This resulted in her receiving endless little attentions from Sir John; but more than once she felt quite irritated with her brother, who seemed to find no more pleasure in the carefully cooked viands than in the homely joints at The Firs. He ate a little of what was handed to him, almost mechanically, and drank sparingly of the baronet's choice wines; but his mind was busy upon nothing else than the subject upon which Glynne was asking him questions.

The major had plenty to say to Lucy, but he kept noticing the increase of animation in Glynne. For she had been awakened from her ordinary, placid, dreamy state to an intense interest in the subject under discussion.

Major Day did not know why he did it, but three times as that dinner progressed, he laid down his

knife and fork, thrust his hands beneath the table, and rubbed them softly.

'Muscles is out in the cold to-night,' he muttered. 'He'll have to go in training for exercising his patience. Bring him to his senses.'

Possibly it was very weak of the major, but he had fresh in his memory, several little pieces of bitter ridicule directed at him by the captain, respecting the botanical pursuit in which he engaged.

Now, it so happened that early in the day the major had been out for a long walk, and had come upon a magnificent cluster of a fungus that he had not yet tried for its edible qualities. It was the peculiar grey-brown, scaly-topped mushroom, called by botanists *Amanita Rubescens*, and said to be of admirable culinary value.

'We'll have a dish of these to-night,' thought the major, picking a fair quantity of the choicest specimens, which he took home and gave to the butler, with instructions to hand them to the cook for a dish in the second course.

Morris, the butler, put the basket down upon the hall table, and went to see to the drawing down of a window blind; and no sooner had he gone than Rolph, who had heard the order, came from the billiard-room into the hall to get his hat and stick preparatory to starting for a walk.

He was passing the major's basket where it stood upon the hall table, when an idea flashed across his

brain, and he stopped, glanced round, grinned, and then, as no one was near, took up the creel, walked swiftly across the hall out into the garden, dived into the plantation, ran rapidly down the long walk out of sight of the house, and turned into the pheasant preserve. Here, throwing out the major's fungi, he looked sharply about and soon collected an equal quantity of the first specimens he encountered, and then turned back.

'A sarcastic old humbug,' he muttered; 'let him have a dish of these, and if any of them disagree with him, it will be a lesson for the old wretch. He experimented upon me once with his confounded *boleti*, as he called them; now, I'll experimentalise upon him.'

As a rule such an act as this could not have been performed unseen, but fate favoured the captain upon this occasion, and he reached the hall without being noticed, replaced the creel upon the table from which he had taken it, and then went for a walk.

Now, it so happened that Morris, the butler, had crossed the hall since, but the creel not being where he had placed it, he did not recall his orders; but going to answer a bell half-an-hour afterwards, he caught sight of the basket, remembered what he had been told, and, on his return, took the fungi into the kitchen.

'Here, cook,' he said, 'you're to dress these for the second course.'

In due time cook, who was a very slow-moving, thoughtful woman, found herself by the basket which she opened, and then turned the fungi out upon a dish.

'Well,' she exclaimed, 'of all the trash! Mrs Mason, do, for goodness' sake, look at these.'

Glynne's maid, who was performing some mystic kind of cooking on her own account, to wit, stirring up a saucepan full of thin blue starch with a tallow candle, turned and looked at the basket of fungi, and said,—

'Oh, the idea! What are they for?'

'To cook, because them star-gazing folks are coming. Morris says Miss Glynne's always talking about finding the focus now.'

'But these things are poison.'

'Of course they are. I wouldn't give them to a pig;' and with all the autocratic determination of a lady in her position, she took the dish, and threw its contents behind her big roasting fire. 'There, that's the place for them! Mary, go and tell Jones I want him.'

Jones was cook's mortal enemy; and in the capacity of supplier of fruit and vegetables for kitchen use, he had daily skirmishes with the lady, whom he openly accused of spoiling his choice productions, and sending them to table unfit for use, while she retaliated by telling him often that he could not grow a bit of garden-stuff fit to be seen—that his potatoes were

watery, his beetroot pink, his cauliflowers masses of caterpillars and slugs.

Under these circumstances, Jones tied the string of his blue serge apron a little more tightly, twisted the said serge into a tail, which he tucked round his waist, and leaving the forcing-house, where he was busy, set his teeth, pushed his hat down over his nose, and, quite prepared for a serious quarrel, walked heavily into the kitchen. But only to be disarmed, for there was a plate on the white table, containing a splendid wedge of raised pie, with a piece of bread, and a jug of ale beside a horn.

Jones looked at cook, and she nodded and smiled; she also condescended to put her lips first to the freshly-filled horn, and then folded her arms and leaned against the table, while the gardener ate his 'snack,' feeling that after all, though she had her bit of temper, cook was really what he called 'a good sort.'

'Ah,' he said at last, with a sigh, after a little current chat, 'I must be off now. Let's see; you've got in all you want for to-night?'

'Yes, everything,' said cook, smiling, 'and I must get to work, too. You haven't any mushrooms, I suppose?'

'Haven't got any mushrooms?' said Jones, reproachfully. 'Why, I've a bed just coming on.'

'Then I should like to make a dish to-day, and use a few in one of my sauces,' said cook; and

half-an-hour later Jones returned with a basketful, which he deposited upon the table with a thrill of pride.

The presence of Moray Alleyne, and the way in which he was taken up, as the captain called it, by Glynne, so filled the mind of Rolph, that there was no room for anything else, and as the dinner went on, his annoyance so sharpened his appetite that he ate very heartily of the two *entrées* and the joint. It was not until the second course was in progress that a dish was handed round, to which, after a telegraphic glance between the major and Lucy, that young lady helped herself. Glynne took some mechanically, to the major's great delight, and, like Lucy, went on eating. Then the dish was handed to Rolph, who fixed his glass in his eye, and started slightly as he suddenly recalled the trick he had played in the hall.

'What's this?' he said in an under-tone to the butler.

'*Sham pinions ho nateral*, sir.'

'Humph! no. Take the dish to Mr Alleyne.'

The man took the dish round to the guest, who, talking the while to Glynne, helped himself liberally, and went on eating.

'Won't you have some, Rolph?' said the major, helping himself in turn.

'I! No. Don't care for such dishes.'

'Seems to be very good,' said the major. 'Smells delicious, and everyone's eating it.'

'Not the ladies?' whispered Rolph.

'Yes; they're revelling.'

'Good heavens!' muttered Rolph; and he turned cold and damp, the perspiration standing upon his brow.

'Nothing worse in this world than prejudice,' said the major, taking a mouthful of the delicate dish. Ah, yes: superb. Jack, old fellow, try some of these fungi.'

'Get out!' said Sir John, sipping his wine.

'But, my dear boy, they are simply magnificent,' cried the major. 'Here, take the dish to your master.'

The mushrooms were handed, and Sir John tried a little, recalled the dish, and had some more, while Rolph sat perfectly still, not daring to speak, though he saw everyone at the table partaking of the stew.

'What are these?' said Sir John. 'They're very good.'

'*Agaricus Rubescens*, my boy. Tons of them rot every year, because there is no one to pick them but Miss Lucy Alleyne and your humble servant here.'

'Well, don't let's have any more go rotten,' cried Sir John. 'They're delicious, eh, Mr Alleyne?'

'I beg your pardon,' said the visitor, looking up.

'These fungi,' said the host, 'uncommonly good.'

'Yes, admirable,' said Alleyne, who had finished his, and had not the most remote recollection of their quality.

'I don't believe he tasted them,' said Sir John to himself.

'These are the fungi, Morris, that I gave you to-day to take into the kitchen?' said the major.

'Yes, sir,' said Morris, and the major finished his with great gusto.

'Uncommonly delicious!' he said.

'Capital, Jem,' cried Sir John; 'but I hope they won't poison us.'

'Trust me for that. They've been well tested, and are perfectly wholesome. Splendid dish.'

'They'll all be in agonies before long,' thought Rolph. 'I hope poor Glynne won't be very bad. A bit of an attack would serve her right, though, for going on like that with the star-gazer. Phew! how hot the room is.'

'I give you credit, Jem,' cried the host. 'What do you say, Miss Alleyne? It's of no use to ask these people; they are off on comets or something else.'

'Oh, I'm growing a confirmed fungus-eater, Sir John,' said Lucy. 'I am Major Day's disciple. I think them delicious.'

'You're a very charming little lassie, and I like you immensely,' thought Sir John, gazing at Lucy curiously and thoughtfully; 'but I hope Jem has too

much common sense to be making a fool of himself over you. He likes you, I know, but fungus-hunting is one thing and wife-hunting another. No, I won't think it of you. You wouldn't lead him on, and he's too full of sound sense.'

'I shall have to leave the table,' said Rolph to himself. 'I never felt so uncomfortable in my life. Ought I to go and get a doctor here? D—n the toadstools! I only meant the major to taste them. Who'd ever have thought that they'd all go in for them. Phew! how hot the room is. Champagne.'

The butler filled up his glass, and Rolph, in his excitement, tossed it off, with the result that the next time Morris went round, he filled the captain's glass again.

'The thought of it all makes me feel ill,' said Rolph to himself.

I've got a splendid pupil in Miss Alleyne,' said the major, sipping his wine. 'I've given Glynne up. She can't tell an agaric from one of the polypori. Mr Alleyne, if you're trying to teach her star-names, you may give it up as a bad job.'

'Don't interrupt, uncle,' said Glynne, shaking her finger at him, playfully.

'How pale the poor girl looks,' thought Rolph, who was now in an agony of apprehension. 'Phew! this room is warm!' and he gulped down his glass of wine.

'Jack,' said the major, 'I couldn't have believed

those fungi would be so delicious; cook has won the *cordon bleu*. Here, Morris, you are sure these are the same fungi?'

'Certain, sir,' replied the butler. 'I took them into the kitchen myself.'

'And were they all used?'

'I think so, sir; part for the ontries in the first course.'

'What!' roared Rolph, who had been horribly guilty over that dish; and he turned white as he clutched the seat of his chair.

'*Salmy of poulay ho sham pinions*, sir,' said Morris, politely; and he picked a *menu* from the table and laid it before the captain, who refixed the glass in his eye and glared at the card.

'Do you mean to say that the hashed chicken and the other dish was made up with those con—those toadstools that were—were in that basket?'

'Yes, sir, the basket Major Day brought in, sir,' said Morris.

Sir John chuckled. The major burst into a regular roar.

'Are—are you sure, Morris?' gasped Rolph, turning a sickly yellow.

'Yes, sir; quite sure.'

'My dear fellow,' cried the major, wiping his eyes, 'what is the matter?'

'I've—I've eaten a great many of them,' panted Rolph.

'Well, so we all have, and delicious they were. Why, hang it, man, they won't poison you.'

'Don't!' gasped Rolph, with a wild look in his eyes; and, clutching at the decanter, he poured a quantity of sherry into a tumbler and gulped it down.

'I say, Rob, are you ill?' said Sir John, kindly.

'Yes—no—I don't know,' gasped the captain, gazing wildly from one to the other, in search of a fresh victim to the poison.

'Would you like to leave the table?' said Sir John. 'Here, Morris, give Captain Rolph a liqueur of brandy.'

The butler hurriedly filled a wine glass, and the captain tossed it off as if it had been water, gazing dizzily round at the anxious faces at the table.

'Do you feel very bad, Robert?' said Glynne, rising and going round to his side to speak with great sympathy, as she softly laid her hand upon his broad shoulder.

'Horribly,' whispered the captain, who was fast losing his nerve. 'Don't you?'

'I? No. I am quite well.'

'It was those cursed toadstools,' cried Rolph, savagely.

'Nonsense, my dear sir,' said the major, firmly. 'We have all eaten them, and they were delicious.'

'Give me your arm, some one,' groaned Rolph, rising from his chair; and the major caught him,

and helped him from the room, Alleyne and Sir John following, after begging Lucy and Glynne to remain seated.

'Send for a doctor—quick—I'm poisoned,' said Rolph—'quick!'

'Here, send to the town,' cried Sir John. 'Let a groom gallop over. No; there's Mr Oldroyd in the village. Here, you, James, run across the park, you'll be there in ten minutes.'

'Telegraph—physician,' gasped Rolph.

'Poor fellow! He seems bad.'

'I think,' said Alleyne, quietly, 'that a good deal of it is nervous dread.'

Rolph looked daggers at him, and then closed his eyes and groaned, as he lay back on a sofa in the library.

'Have—have you telegraphed—sent a telegram?' said Rolph, after lying back with his eyes closed for a few minutes.

'I have sent for Mr Oldroyd,' said Sir John, 'and we will go by his advice. It would take a man half an hour to gallop to the station. We shall have the doctor here long before that.'

Rolph looked round, partly for help, partly to see who was to be the next man attacked, and then closed his eyes, and lay breathing heavily.

'I wish you wouldn't bring in those confounded —eh? Who's there?' said Sir John. 'Oh, you, my dear. No, you can't do any good. Go and

talk to Miss Alleyne. Fit of indigestion coming on the top of a lot of physical exertion—training and that sort of thing. He'll be better soon.'

Glynne, who had come to the door, closed it and went away, while Rolph uttered a groan.

'I was saying,' continued Sir John, 'I wish you wouldn't bring those confounded things into the house. You will be poisoning us some day.'

'What nonsense, Jack!' cried the major. 'I tell you the fungi were perfectly good. You ate some of them yourself. How do you feel?'

'Oh, I'm all right.'

'So is Mr Alleyne; so are the girls; so am I. It is not the mushrooms, I'm sure. More likely your wine. We are all as well as can be.'

'Attack you suddenly,' groaned Rolph, piteously.

'Ah, well if it does,' said the major, 'I won't make such a fuss over it. Why, when we had the cholera among us at Darjeebad, the men did not make more trouble.'

Rolph squeezed his eyes together very closely, and bit his lips, wishing mentally that a fit would seize the major, while he upbraided Fortune for playing him such a prank as this; and then he lay tolerably still, waiting for nearly half an hour, during which notes were compared by the others, one and all of whom declared that they never felt better. Glynne came twice to ask if she could be of any service, and to say that Lucy was eager to help; and

then there were steps in the hall, and, directly after, Oldroyd was shown in, looking perfectly cool and business-like, in spite of his hurried scamper across the park.

'Your man says that Captain Rolph has been poisoned by eating bad mushrooms,' said the young doctor. 'Is this so?'

'He has had some of the same dish as all the rest,' said Sir John; 'and my brother declares they were perfectly safe.'

'Humph!' ejaculated Oldroyd, who had seated himself by his patient, and was questioning and examining him.

'Better get him to bed,' he said, after a pause; 'and, while he is undressing, I will run home and get him something.'

He started directly, and was back just as Rolph sank upon his pillow.

'There, sir, drink that,' said Oldroyd, in a quiet decisive tone; and, after displaying a disposition to refuse, the young officer drank what was offered to him, and soon after sank into a heavy sleep.

'I'll come back about twelve, Sir John,' said the doctor. 'I don't think he will be any worse. In fact, I believe he'll be all right in the morning.'

'But what is it?' said Sir John, in a whisper. 'If it is the mushrooms, why are we not all ill?'

'Well, as far as I can make out,' said Oldroyd, 'there is nothing the matter with him but a nervous

fit, and an indication of too much stimulant. It seems to me that he has frightened himself into the belief that he has been poisoned. But I'll come in again about twelve.'

'No, no; pray stay, Mr Oldroyd,' cried Sir John. 'Come down into the drawing-room, and have a cup of tea and a chat. You don't think we need telegraph for further advice?'

'Really, Sir John, I fail to see why you should,' said Oldroyd. 'Your friend is certainly, as far as my knowledge goes, not seriously ill.'

'Then come and sit down till you want to see him again,' said Sir John. 'I'm very glad to know you, Mr Oldroyd. You do know my brother? Yes, and Mr Alleyne? That's well. Now come and see Miss Day and her friend.—Oh, my dears,' cried the baronet, in his hearty tones, 'here is Mr Oldroyd come to cheer you with the best of news. Mr Oldroyd, my daughter— Well, Morris, what is it?'

'If you please, Sir John, cook says, Sir John, she's very sorry that there should be any unpleasant feeling about the mushrooms; but she had an accident with the ones Major Day sent to be cooked, and those you had for dinner were Jones's own growing in the pits.'

'I could have sworn they had the regular mushroom flavour,' cried the major.

'Then we needn't fidget about our dinner,' said Sir John, laughing. 'Doctor, you're right. Morris, that will do.'

Somehow from that minute the evening brightened very pleasantly at Brackley. Lucy thought it charming, and Glynne was an attentive listener to every astronomical word that fell from Alleyne's lips. Twice over Oldroyd went up to see his patient, and each time came back with the information that he was sleeping heavily, and that there was not the slightest cause for alarm.

After that, no one was uneasy, and Rolph was almost forgotten. Alleyne left with his sister about eleven, the two being sent home in the brougham. Glynne needed no persuasion to go to bed, and Oldroyd sat and smoked a cigar with the major and Sir John in the library till twelve, when he went and had another look at his patient.

'Well,' said the baronet, on his return, 'what news?'

'Sleeping like a baby,' replied Oldroyd. 'I think I'll go now.'

'Anybody sitting up for you, Mr Oldroyd?'

'Oh, no.'

'Then there's no one to be uneasy about your absence?'

'Certainly not.'

'Then would you oblige me by stopping here to-night, in case you are wanted?'

Oldroyd was perfectly willing to oblige, and he was shown to a spare bedroom, where he slept

heartily till eight, and then rose and went to the patient, whom he found dressing for his morning walk, while his self-issued bulletin was that he was better.

He would not believe the cook.

CHAPTER XIV.

TERRESTRIAL TRIALS.

'I THINK it was very foolish of your brother to invite them, Lucy,' said Mrs Alleyne, austerely. 'All these preparations are not made without money; and when they are made, we have the bitterness of feeling that what is luxury to us is to them contemptible and mean.'

'Oh, but, mamma, you don't know Glynne, or you would not talk like that. She is as simple in her tastes as can be, and thinks nothing of the luxury in which they live.'

'She would think a great deal of it, my dear, if, by any misfortune in life, it should all pass from her.'

'No, mamma, I don't think she would,' said Lucy. 'She is a strange girl.'

'For my part,' said Mrs Alleyne, very sternly, 'I don't think we are doing wisely in keeping up this intimacy.'

'Oh, mamma!'

'I have said it. Look at the expense I have been put to in preparations. In the constant struggle

which I go through day after day, paring and contriving to make our little income last out; any addition of this kind is a weariness and a care. Of what good, pray, is this visit but to satisfy the curiosity of a few heartless people?'

'Oh, mamma, don't say that. Glynne is the kindest and most amiable of girls, and nobody could be nicer to me than the major and Sir John.'

'Of course they are nice to you—to my daughter,' said Mrs Alleyne, pulling up her mittens—a very dingy black pair that had lain by till they were specked with a few grey spots of mildew.

'And the major thinks very highly of Moray.'

'It is only natural that he should,' said Mrs Alleyne, haughtily. 'But I repeat, I see no advantage of a social nature to be gained by this intimacy, even if we wished it.'

'But you forget about Moray, mamma, dear.'

'I forget nothing about your brother, Lucy. But pray, what do you mean by this allusion?'

'His need of change. He has certainly been better lately.'

'Decidedly not,' replied Mrs Alleyne, making a fresh effort to cover a very large and unpleasantly prominent vein that ran from the back of her hand above her wrist. 'I have noticed that Moray is more quiet and thoughtful than ever.'

'But Mr Oldroyd said yesterday, mamma, that he was better.'

'Mr Oldroyd gave his opinion, my dear, but it was only the opinion of one man. Mr Oldroyd may be mistaken.'

'But, mamma, he seems so clever, and to know so much about Moray's case.'

'Yes, my child—seems; but these young medical men often jump at conclusions, and are ready to take for granted that they understand matters which are completely sealed.'

Lucy coloured slightly, and remained silent.

'For my part,' continued Mrs Alleyne, 'I do not feel at all easy respecting Moray's state, and his health is too serious a thing to be trifled with.'

Lucy's colour deepened as Mrs Alleyne swept out of the room.

'I'm sure he's clever, and I'm sure he was quite right about Moray,' she said. 'It's a shame to say so, but I wish mamma would not be so prejudiced. She will not be, though, when she knows Glynne better.'

There was a pause here, and Lucy sat looking very intently before her, the intent gaze in her face being precisely similar to that seen in her brother's countenance when he was watching a far-off planet, and striving to learn from it something of its mysteries and ways.

But Lucy was not studying some far-off planet, though her task was perhaps as hard, for she was trying to read the future, and to discover what

there was in store for her brother and herself. She could not think of Moray being always engaged studying stars, nor of herself as continually at home with her mother leading that secluded life in the sombre brick mansion, finding it cheerless and dull in summer, cold and bleak in winter when the wind roared in the pine trees, till it was as if the sea were beating the shore hard by.

'There is sure to be some change,' she said, brightening up. 'I know it, but I hope it will not bring trouble.'

No further allusions were made to the coming visit of the family from Brackley, but the next day and the next, to use Lucy's words, mamma led her such a life that she wished—and yet she did not wish—that the visit was not coming off, so troublesome did the preparations grow.

Mrs Alleyne was going about her blank, chilly house one morning, looking very much troubled; and now and then she stopped to wring her hands, but it was generally in a cupboard or in a drawer, when there was not the slightest likelihood of her being seen. Her forehead was deeply lined, and there was a peculiar drawing down about the corners of her lips that indicated care.

It was the old story—money. She had been up to town only the week before to sell out a sum in Government Stock, to pay for an astronomical instrument her son required—a tremendously costly piece of

mechanism, thus leaving herself poorer than ever; and now her idol had been putting her to fresh expense.

'So thoughtless of him,' she moaned, with her face in the linen closet—'so foolish. He seems to have no idea whatever of the value of money, and I don't know what I shall do.'

But all the same there was the same glow of satisfaction in Mrs Alleyne's breast that she used to feel when she had bought the idol a wooden horse, or a toy waggon full of sacks, or one of those instruments of torture upon wheels, which, when a child draws it across the floor, emits a series of wire-born notes of a most discordant kind.

Mrs Alleyne turned over three or four clean tablecloths, opening them out and looking wistfully at darns and frayings, and places where the clothes pegs had torn away the hems when they had been hung out to dry. These she refolded with a sigh, and put back.

'Oh, my boy, my boy, if you only thought a little more about this world as well as the other worlds!' she sighed, as she closed the door, and, with her brow growing more wrinkled, wrung her hands over the pantry sink.

It was not that she had washed them, for the tap was dry, no water being ever pumped into the upper cistern, and the pantry was devoted to the reception of Mrs Alleyne's meagre stores.

There were cupboards here that held glass and china—good old china and glass; but in the one, there were marks of mendings and rivets, and in the other chips and, worse troubles, cracks, and odd glasses without feet, or whose feet were upon the next shelf.

'I don't know how we shall manage,' sighed Mrs Alleyne, wringing her hands once more. 'It was very, very thoughtless of him. The knives are worst of all.'

She unrolled a packet or two, which contained nothing but table knives that had once been remarkably good, but which had done their work in company with hard usage, and some of which had shed their ivory handles, while others were thin and double edged, others again being bent at the points, or worn down by cleaning until they were about two-thirds of their original length.

'Dear me—dear me! how things do wear out!' sighed Mrs Alleyne; and, raising her eyes, she saw her face reflected in a little square glass hanging upon the wall—'even ourselves,' she added, sadly.

Just then Lucy came in hurriedly.

'Oh, mamma,' she cried, 'I'm sure I don't know what we shall do. The more I look up things, the worse they seem. It is dreadful; it is horrible. I shall blush for shame.'

'And why, may I ask?' said Mrs Alleyne, sternly.

'Because people will do nothing but spy out the

poverty of the land. Moray has no sense at all, or he would never have been so foolish as to ask them.'

'Your brother had his own good reasons for asking Sir John Day, his brother, and his daughter, and I beg that you will not speak in that disrespectful way of your brother's plans.'

'But you don't see, mamma.'

'I see everything, my child,' said Mrs Alleyne, stiffly.

'But you don't think how awkward it will be.'

'Yes, I have thought of all that.'

'But Moray never does. How are we to entertain people who are accustomed to live in luxury, and who have abundance of plate and china and glass, and servants to wait upon them? Oh, we shall look ridiculous.'

'Lucy!'

'I don't care, mamma, I can't help it. I've been working away to see if I could not get things in proper trim to do us justice, but it is horrible. Moray must write and tell them they are not to come.'

'My son shall do nothing of the kind, Lucy, and I desire that you do the best you can, so that Moray may be content.'

'But, mamma, we have no flowers, no fruit for dessert, no pretty glass and vases; and I know the dinner will be horrible.'

'Moray asked the Days to come and see us, not

our household arrangements, and we must give them some dinner before they go up into the observatory.'

'Oh, very well, mamma,' said Lucy, 'I have protested. You and Moray must have it your own way.'

'Of course,' said Mrs Alleyne, composedly; 'and I beg that you will find no more fault with your brother's arrangements.'

'No, mamma: I have done.'

'I dare say Captain Rolph very often dines far worse at his mess than we shall dine to-morrow.'

'But surely he is not coming, mamma,' cried Lucy in horror; 'he will be jeering at everything.'

'If he is so extremely ungentlemanly, it is no fault of ours. Yes, he is coming; and, by the way, I did not tell you, I have just asked Mr Oldroyd to join us.'

'Mamma!' cried Lucy, turning scarlet.

'Now don't exclaim against that, my dear,' said Mrs Alleyne. 'I am sure it will be almost a charity to have him here. He cannot be too grand for our simple ways.'

Poor Lucy shrank away looking very thoughtful, and, resigning herself to fate, went busily about the house, working like a little slave, and arranging the place to the best advantage; but only to break down at last, with a piteous burst of tears, as she saw how miserable a result she had achieved, and compared her home with that of Glynne.

Mrs Alleyne was not in much better spirits, indulging herself as she did in various wringings of the hands in closets and corners, but all in the most furtive way, as she too thought of the barrenness of the house.

The next morning the preparations for the little dinner were in hurried progress, Lucy busily working with gloomy resignation, and the kitchen given over to the woman who had come to cook. Then the large covered cart from Brackley drew up to the gate, and upon Eliza going down, the man who drove helped her to unbar the great gates, and led his horse in and right round to the kitchen door.

He was the bearer of a note for Mrs Alleyne, and while Eliza had taken it in, and the recipient was reading it, to afterwards hand it over to Lucy, Sir John's man began unloading the cart in the most matter-of-fact way, and arranging things upon the kitchen dresser.

'What does he say, that he begs your pardon, and knowing that we have no garden, would we accept a few trifles of flowers and a little fruit?'

Mrs Alleyne frowned, and the shadow on her countenance deepened after Sir John's man had departed with the cart, for the trifles sent over were a magnificent collection of cut flowers, with grapes, a pine, hot-house peaches, and nectarines and plums.

Lucy coloured with pleasure, for all was most thoughtfully contrived. Even choice leaves in a neat

bunch were included, ready for decorating the fruit in the dessert dishes. But directly after she could not help sharing her mother's annoyance—it seemed so like looking upon them as poor.

'It is almost an insult,' said Mrs Alleyne at last.

Lucy looked up at her wistfully, with the cloud now crossing her own bright little face.

'It is because we live in so humble a manner,' cried Mrs Alleyne, angrily. 'It is cruel—a display of arrogance—because I choose to live quietly that Moray may proceed with his great discoveries in science.'

Lucy gazed at her mother's face, in which she could read the growing anger and mortification.

'Oh, I wish Moray had not been so ready to invite them,' she said to herself.

'The things shall go back,' exclaimed Mrs Alleyne at last.

'Oh, mamma,' whispered Lucy, clinging to her and trying to calm her anger, 'don't—pray don't say that. It is only a present of fruit and flowers, after all.'

'You will not send the things back, mamma.'

Mrs Alleyne was silent for a few moments, and then said huskily,—

'No: they shall remain, but Moray must not know; and mind this, Lucy, when they come there is sure to be an offer for the man-servant to stop and wait. This must be declined.'

'Oh, yes, mamma,' cried Lucy, excitedly, as she began to imagine Sir John's footman being witness of the shifts made in re-washing plates, and forks, and spoons.

'We must submit to the insult, I suppose. I cannot resent it for Moray's sake. They are his guests, and must be treated with respect.'

In due time Sir John and Glynne, with Rolph and the major, arrived, and were heartily welcomed by Moray, who seemed to have thrown off his quiet thoughtfulness of manner, and to be striving to set the visitors at their ease. So warm and hearty, too, were Sir John and the major, that Lucy brightened; and had Rolph taken another tone, and Mrs Alleyne been satisfied with doing all that lay in her power to make her visitors welcome, leaving the rest, all would have gone well. But, in face of the stern, calm dignity of mien which she displayed, it was impossible for Sir John to adopt his easy-going sociability. In fact, between them, Mrs Alleyne and Rolph spoiled the dinner.

It was not by any means the greatest mistake that Mrs Alleyne had ever made in her life, but it was a serious one all the same, to attempt a regular society dinner in the face of so many difficulties. Poor woman: she felt that it was her duty to show Sir John that she was a lady, and understood the social amenities of life.

The consequence was that, having attempted too

much, all went wrong : Eliza got into the most horrible tangles, and half-a-dozen times over, Sir John wished they had had a good Southdown leg of mutton, vegetables, and a pudding, and nothing else.

But he did not have his wish—for there was soup that was not good ; soles that had become torn and tattered in the extraction from the frying-pan ; veal cutlets, whose golden egging and crumbing had been in vain, for this coating had dissolved apparently into the sauce. The other *entrée* emitted an odour which made the major hungry, being a curried chicken ; but, alas ! the rice was in the condition known by schoolboys as 'mosh-posh.' Then came a sirloin of beef and a pair of boiled fowls, with an intervening tongue and white sauce—at least the sauce should have been white, and the chickens should have been young—while what kind of conscience the butcher possessed who defrauded Mrs Alleyne by sending her in that sirloin of beef, with the announcement that it was prime, it is impossible to say.

The table looked bright and pretty with its fine white cloth, bright flowers and fruit, but the dinner itself was a series of miserable failures, through all of which Mrs Alleyne sat, stern, and with a fixed smile upon her countenance. Moray and Glynne were serenely unconscious, eating what was before them, but with their thoughts and conversation far away amongst the stars. Sir John and the major, with the most chivalrous courtesy, ignored everything, and kept up the

heartiest of conversation; while Rolph, who was in a furious temper at having been obliged to come, fixed his glass in his eye and stolidly stared when he did not sneer.

It was poor Lucy upon whom the burden of the dinner cares fell, and she suffered a martyrdom. Oldroyd saw that she was troubled, but did not fully realise the cause, while the poor girl shivered and shrank, and turned now hot, now cold, as she read Rolph's contempt for the miserable fare.

'Yes,' said the Major to himself, 'it's a mistake. She meant well, poor woman, but if she had given us a well-cooked steak how much better it would have been.'

Mrs Alleyne, behind her mask of smiles, also noted how Rolph's eye-glass was directed at the various dishes, and how his plate went away, time after time, with the viands scarcely tasted. She hated him with a bitter hatred, and felt full of rejoicing to see his annoyance with Glynne, whose calm, handsome face lit up and grew animated when Alleyne spoke to her, answering questions, questioning her in return, and telling her of his work during the past few days.

The meal went on very slowly, and such success as attended it was due to Sir John and the major, the former devoting himself to his hostess, while the latter relieved poor little Lucy's breast of some of its burden of trouble.

'Ah,' he said once, out of sheer kindness, just after

Rolph had laughed silently at a grievous mistake made by Eliza, who, in a violent perspiration with work and excitement, had dropped a dish in the second course, breaking it, and spreading a too tremulous cabinet pudding and its sauce upon the well-worn carpet. 'Ah, a capital dinner, Miss Alleyne, only wanted one dish to have made it complete.'

'How can you be so unkind, Major Day!' said Lucy, in a low, choking voice; 'the poor girl is so unused to company, and she could not help it.'

Major Day looked petrified. He had advanced his remark like a squadron to cover the rout of the cabinet pudding, and he was astounded by Lucy's flank movement, as she took his remark to refer to the maid.

'My dear child,' he stammered, 'you mistake me.'

Poor Lucy could not contain herself. The vexations of the whole dinner which had been gathering within her now burst forth; and though she spoke to him in an undertone, her face was crimson, and it was all she could do to keep from bursting into a flood of tears.

'It is so unkind of you,' continued Lucy; 'we are not used to having company. Moray did not think how difficult it would be for us to make proper preparations, and it is not our fault that everything is so bad.'

'My dear child!' whispered the major again.

'You need not have added to my misery by calling it a capital dinner, and alluding to the dish.'

Fortunately Sir John was chatting loudly to Mrs Alleyne, Oldroyd was in a warm argument with Rolph on the subject of training, and Alleyne was holding Glynne's attention by describing to her the theory that the stars were in all probability suns with planets revolving round them, as we do about our own giver of warmth and light. Hence, then, the major's little interlude with Lucy was unnoticed, and Eliza was able to remove the evidences of the disaster with a dustpan and brush.

'My dear Miss Alleyne, give me credit for being an officer and a gentleman,' said the major, quietly; 'the dish I alluded to was one of some choice fungi, such as we discover for ourselves in the woods and fields. I meant nothing else—believe me.'

Lucy darted a grateful look in his eyes, and followed it up with a smile, which sent a peculiar little sting into Oldroyd's breast.

'For,' the latter argued with himself, 'elderly gentlemen do sometimes manage to exercise a great deal of influence over the susceptible hearts of maidens, and Major Day is a smart, attractive, old man.'

His attention was, however, taken up directly by Rolph, who, in a half-haughty, condescending tone asked him if he had studied training from its medical and surgical side, nettling him by his manner, and

putting him upon his mettle to demolish his adversary in argument.

'Thank you, major,' whispered Lucy. 'I might have known—I ought to have known better.'

And then, with the ice broken between herself and her old botanical tutor and friend, she seemed to jump with girlish eagerness at the opportunity for lightening her burdened heart.

'Everything has gone so dreadfully,' she whispered. 'I have been sitting upon thorns ever since you all came. It has been heartbreaking, and I shall be so glad when it is all over, and you are gone.'

'Tut—tut! you inhospitable little creature,' said the major. 'For shame. I shall not. Why, surely my little pupil does not think we came over here for the sake of the dinner. Fie!—fie!—fie! Brother John, there, enjoys a crust of bread and cheese and a glass of ale better than anything; while I, an old campaigner, used, when I was on service, to think myself very lucky if I got a biscuit and a slice of melon, or a handful of dates, for a meal.'

'But Sir John said you were so particular, and that was why he sent the fruit.'

'My brother John is a gentleman,' said the major, smiling. 'But there, there, let me see my little pupil smiling, and at her ease again. Why, we've come over this evening to feast upon stars and planets, when the proper time comes. I say, look at Glynne, how bright and eager she looks. She is not troub-

ling herself about the dinner; nor your brother neither.'

'Moray?' replied Lucy. 'Oh, no; nothing troubles him. Poor fellow! If you gave him only some bran he would eat it and never say a word. It's throwing nice things away to make them for him.'

At last the dessert plates had been placed upon the table, and the fruit handed round by Eliza, who, in spite of several nods and frowns from Mrs Alleyne, insisted upon staying to the very last, by way of salving her conscience for the pudding lapse. Then she finally departed to look after the coffee; the ladies rose and left the room, and the gentlemen drew closer together to discuss their wine.

Some cups of capital coffee were brought in, its quality being due to the fact that Lucy had slipped into the kitchen to make it herself; and after these had been enjoyed, Sir John drew attention to the object of their visit. Rolph yawned, and made up his mind to remain behind, to go into the garden and have a cigar, and Alleyne led the way into the drawing-room, Glynne rising directly to come and meet them, all eagerness to enjoy the promised inspection of the observatory.

CHAPTER XV.

GLYNNE LOOKS AT THE MOON. THE PROFESSOR AT HIS HEART.

THE secret of the poverty of Mrs Alleyne's home was read by the major and Sir John, as they followed their host and Glynne along a bare passage and through two green-baized doors, into the great dome-covered chambers where Alleyne pursued his studies, for on all sides were arranged astronomical instruments of the newest invention and costliest kind. The outlay had been slow—a hundred now and a hundred then; but the result had been thousands of pounds spent upon the various pieces of intricate mechanism, and their mounting upon solid iron pillars, resting on massive piers of cement or stone.

Glynne uttered a faint cry of surprise and delight as she saw the long tubes with their wheels and pivots arranged so that the reclining observer could turn his glass in any direction; gazed in the great trough that seemed to have a bottom covered with looking-glass, but which was half full of quicksilver; noted that there were sliding shutters in the roof, and

various pieces of mechanism, whose uses she longed to have explained.

It was all old to Lucy, who felt a new pleasure, though, in her friend's eagerness, while Mrs Alleyne, who had suffered torments all the evening in mortified pride, felt, as she saw the looks of wonder of the guests, and their appreciation of her son's magnificent observatory, that she was now reaping her reward.'

'Bless my soul!' cried Sir John, 'I am astounded. I did not think there was such a place outside Greenwich.

Mrs Alleyne bowed and smiled; and then, as Sir John began eagerly inspecting the various objects and arrangements around, and the major chatted to Lucy, she gave a curious look at her son, who was bending over Glynne, explaining to her the use of the quicksilver trough, and arranging a glass afterwards, so that she might see how it was brought to bear upon a reflected star.

As Mrs Alleyne glanced round she saw that Oldroyd was also watching her son and Glynne, and her eyes directly after met those of the young doctor, whose thoughts she tried to read—perhaps with success.

For the next half-hour, Glynne was being initiated in the mysteries of the transit instrument, and had the pleasure of seeing star after star cross the zenith, after which, the moon having risen well

above the refracting and magnifying mists of earth, the largest reflector was brought to bear upon its surface.

Ejaculations of delight kept escaping from Glynne's lips as she gazed at the bright tops of the various volcanoes, searched the dark shadows and craters, and literally revelled in the glories of the brightly embossed silver crescent. She had a hundred questions to ask, with all the eager curiosity and animation of a child, and with the advantage of having one as patient as he was learned, ready to respond upon the instant.

'I feel so terribly selfish,' cried Glynne, at last. 'Oh, papa, you must come and look. Uncle, it is wonderful.'

'We'll have a look another time,' said Sir John, good-humouredly; 'only don't wear out Mr Alleyne's patience.'

'Oh, I hope he will not think me tiresome,' cried Glynne, whose eye was directed to the glass again on the instant, 'but it is so wonderful. I could watch the moon all night. Now, Mr Alleyne, just a little way from the left edge, low down, there is a brilliant ring of light—no, not quite a ring; it is as if a portion of it had been torn away, and— Oh! Robert! how you startled me.'

The spell was broken, for Rolph had entered the observatory, having finished his cigar. He had been standing at the door for a few moments, watching

the scene before him, and a frown came over his forehead as he heard the eagerness of his betrothed's words, and saw the impressive way in which Alleyne was bending towards her, and answering her questions. Directly after, the young officer crossed the observatory, laid his hand almost rudely upon Alleyne's shoulder, and nodded to him as if to say, 'Stand on one side.'

Alleyne started, coloured, and then drew back, with the major watching him intently, while Rolph laid his hand playfully upon Glynne's forehead, and slipped it before her eyes.

'Now then, have you found the focus. What is it? A penny a peep? Here, Mr Alleyne, do you take the money?'

A dead silence fell upon the group till the major hastened to break it by saying a few words of praise of the place to Mrs Alleyne.

Soon afterwards they went back to the drawing-room and partook of tea, the carriage arriving directly after, and everyone thinking it time to leave, for a curious chill had come over the party, Glynne having subsided into her old, silent, inanimate way, and no effort of the major or Sir John producing anything more than a temporary glow.

'Why, how quiet you are, Glynne,' said Rolph, as they were on their way home.

'I was thinking,' she replied, quietly.

'What about?'

'About?—Oh, the wonders of—of what I have seen to-night.'

. . . . . .

'Are you satisfied, my son?' said Mrs Alleyne, when she kissed him that night.

'Yes, dear mother, thoroughly,' he said to her; and then to himself—'No.'

END OF VOL. I.

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